

## **Woolworth's Audrey Hepburn and the Boy With the Thousand Yard Stare by vcatrashfiend**

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**Summary:** A look at the time before the Upside Down. Joyce and Jim meet as children, growing up next door to one another. Joyce's mother - tragically prone to terrible decisions - sets course for Absalom, Indiana; a nearby town filled with unsavory denizens. Slow burn Hopper/Joyce Trigger Warnings: Drug Use

# 1. Chapter 1

Woolworth's Audrey Hepburn and the Boy with the Thousand Yard Stare:

A Stranger Things Prequel

Summary: A look at the time before the Upside Down. The Hoppers and the Fairley's live next door to each other in a town where nothing happens. Their lives are mutually dull. The return of Jonathan Fairley's wayward daughter shakes that dynamic, and brings Joyce into Jim's life.

Quick note: (To my readers) I do apologize to the readers hoping for an update to my story in the 'My Fair Lady' fandom. I was hit with a case of writer's block that I haven't been able to recover from.

Disclaimer: Not my characters, I'm just taking them out for a spin.

Hawkins, Indiana

1955

Jonathan Fairley had been waiting for that phone call for over five years. There had been many phone calls in the interim. Dead ends, false leads, his wife's diagnosis. The last bit had lent urgency to his waiting. They were running out of time, and he cursed himself for not involving the police. For laughing it off in the initial days, weeks and months. For lying to his friends.

*Louisa is at school. You know we were having some difficulties with her behavior, and we felt that a private school was a good fit.*

*Oh, well, I hope it goes well for her. Louisa was such a beautiful child. So talented, too.*

*We're just glad she's not in any sort of trouble, Johnny.*

Oh, she had been in trouble alright. The kind of trouble that tears through a parent's soul, rips it out and sets it aflame. The kind of trouble that made Jonathan careless with his words, with his actions.

Actions that made his wife stop talking for a long while after Louisa fled.

Fourteen years old. A runaway. Pregnant to boot. Off with that filthy son of a bitch that he should've torn apart with his bare hands. His only child and he ran her off, instead of telling her that everything was going to be fine. That he and his wife would help her care for the baby. Or, if she liked they would take her to the city to "take care of it", abhorrent as the concept seemed to him. He was old-fashioned, but in hindsight, he didn't want his sensitive, spirited, brilliant girl to get stuck. In "hindsight", that would've been ideal; but decorated war photographer Jonathan Fairley couldn't have a runaway, pregnant-teen daughter. His pictures were in Life magazine! He was Hawkins's answer to Robert Goddamn Capa. He had a paper to run. A paper with more integrity than the Hawkins Press Gazette, thank you very much.

His chance to make good had finally arrived. She was found alive in San Francisco with a little girl, and no filthy son of a bitch in sight. The private detective said she was living in a flophouse, and telling anyone that would listen that her child's father was dead from a drug overdose, and Louisa was apparently chasing the same dragon.

Jonathan hung up the phone, a feat considering the numbing iciness thrumming through his arms. After a few moments of cavernous blankness, his mind began to race with plans. His wife had to be told. His daughter needed time to dry out. He had to be there with her every step of the way, because that was his punishment. That was the load he had to bear. He could take her to the house by the woods, his rustic escape from town, from life. She could heal there.

The girl. What did the detective say her name was? Jenny? Julia? ... Joyce. Her name was Joyce. Where to keep her? Lilah was bedridden, hooked up to machines. She couldn't mind a five year old girl, and Jonathan couldn't take that little one along to witness... whatever he was going to witness.

Jonathan called Carl Hopper, his next door neighbor. Carl and his wife were an older couple, with a girl, Sarah, who was away at school and boy around Joyce's age, called Jimmy. The Hoppers and Jonathan's family were close. Barbecues and cocktail parties. Lilah

had taught at the same school as Carl's wife, Mimi. Louisa had been friends with Sarah. She would have babysat for Jimmy, but he had been barely three months when the trouble started. Too small for a kid like Louisa to mind. Too small for a scared, pregnant kid like Louisa.

Carl was one of the few people that knew the truth about Louisa, and only recently. Jonathan had conducted the search for years with an almost expert secrecy, and had only confessed when Lilah's illness sent him into a drunken bender that had lasted for days, until Carl rescued him from it. Dried him out at the house by the woods. It had been a nightmare, but would probably pale in comparison to the fire that Louisa was about to walk through.

Carl assured Jonathan that he would be happy to take Joyce into the household.

"Just for a little while, mind. Just until Louisa is herself again. I don't want to burden you and Mimi."

No trouble. None at all. Mimi missed having a girl around, and Jimmy needed to make new friends. It wasn't healthy, him keeping to himself with no one to talk to but his old parents and their old friends. The door would be open the second they flew back in from San Francisco.

The flight, the taxi, the filthy conditions Louisa was living in barely registered to Jonathan. The whole ordeal went by in a haze, and was conducted with minimal resistance from Louisa. He barely looked at the little girl until they arrived back in Indiana. The Hoppers were waiting, Carl, Mimi, and their sullen little boy with his thousand yard stare.

As Jonathan handed Joyce off to Mimi's waiting arms, he finally got a good look. She was underfed, with a riotous snare of chestnut hair, and eyes far too large for her tiny oval face. Really just a reed with oversized, filthy clothes. She hadn't spoken once, not even so much as a whimper as she was carted from one life to another. She accepted Mimi's tearful embrace, and Carl's paternalistic ruffling of her hair.

Jonathan felt a queer sort of longing when they parted. His

acknowledgement of her existence awoke a keen sense of attachment. She was his, more so than the emaciated, shuddering mass at his side. Louisa had looked through her daughter, rather than at her; Jonathan suspected that was their custom.

"Be good, Joyce!" He shouted to her retreating form. The girl paused, and looked back at him.

"Okay," she whispered back.

"You look after her, Jimmy," Jonathan added. The boy, to his surprise, took Joyce's hand, and nodded. Joyce smiled at the boy, with something akin to admiration shining in her overlarge eyes.

A week later, Louisa was back in her old bedroom, and Joyce was installed in the guest room. Both girls were able to sit with Lilah before she quietly slipped into a coma. Two weeks later, Lilah was dead.

Jonathan and Louisa did not speak of their time in the house by the woods, not ever. The experience had shaken the stoic, war-hardened Jonathan Fairley to his very core.

Joyce did not speak much at all. She did, however, spend a great deal of time outdoors, peering over the fence that separated the Fairley yard from the Hoppers. Her frame was so tiny that she had to scale it a bit. Then that boy would emerge from the house next door, cross over into the Fairley yard, and the two of them would wander about for hours, sharing their mutual love of silence.

## 2. Chapter 2

Hawkins, Indiana

1955

Jimmy

James "Jimmy" Hopper's life was sublimely mundane. His world consisted of his mother, his father, and - less frequently - his sister, Sarah. He liked reading, but he didn't like school. He liked the outdoors, but he didn't really care for sports. He was going to be in the first grade in the fall. He heard a rumor that Lonnie Byers was finally going to transfer schools that coming year, which comforted him greatly.

Byers was one of those big kids that thought they had some sort of dominion over babies like Jimmy and Jimmy's friend Benny. Byers was also one of those big kids that liked to torture fat kids like Jimmy and Benny. Jimmy's mother liked to tell him that Byers was mean because he had a rough family life, and he was self-conscious over having repeated the first grade twice already. His father was also continuously in the town jail, typically courtesy of Jimmy's dad.

The summer had been stretching on without much event. Benny was rarely around to play, because he had to help out at his dad's diner, Benny's Burgers. Jimmy overheard his mom and dad talking about what a shame it was that "That poor Hammond kid has to get worked to the bone, at such a young age!" His mom was full of compassion for everyone. His dad told her that it was nobody's business but the Hammond's, and that was that. End of story. Period. Jimmy could have told his mom that it wasn't all that bad. All Benny had to do was wipe down the counter and the tables, and he got all the free French fries and malts he wanted. Jimmy got all of that too, with less effort than Benny because Benny Sr. thought Jimmy was "- a straight-shooting son of a bitch; but please, never repeat that to your parents, kid."

Benny's Burgers was a fun place to be, and as long as Jimmy was home before the street lights turned on, no one really minded him

spending his days there... except when Sunday rolled around, and his mom realized that his church slacks were just a little but tighter than they were before. She never said anything about it, no one in the family ever teased Jimmy about his weight – except when Sarah chidingly referred to him as 'Butterball' after he got into her taffy- but her patiently exasperated expression always said it all.

Jimmy's exquisitely monotonous summer was broken with a phone call to his father. Jimmy was in the kitchen when it happened, sitting at the island with his mother. She was helping him get a head-start on his math primer; something he shouldn't have been able to obtain for another two weeks, along with his class placement; but his mother was a teacher, and getting early homework was just one of the "perks" of the job. The telephone was close enough to the nook that Jimmy could discern that it was Jonathan Fairley on the other line. He loved Jonathan and Lilah. They minded him the fall before, when his parents drove Sarah out to college- Lilah let him have cookies for breakfast, and Jonathan read to him at bedtime; mostly fantasy books, which Jimmy didn't care for, but that was fine. They were a nice couple, but they always seemed to be a little bit sad, especially now that Lilah was sick in the hospital.

Jimmy looked up from his homework, made eye contact with his father, smiled, and waved while mouthing, "Tell him hello for me!" His father grimaced disapprovingly and shook his head before turning his back on Jimmy, walking as far into the dining room as the phone cord would allow. Jimmy leaned forward, craning to hear the conversation. His mother put a guiding hand on his shoulder and righted him back into sitting position.

After the phone was hung up, Jimmy was told that they were going to have a house guest. The granddaughter of Jonathan and Lilah, and the daughter of one of Sarah's old friends, which seemed absurd to Jimmy because Sarah wasn't even a real grown up yet. She still came home on the holidays and some weekends because she didn't have a real house. Any friend of hers would be too young to be a mom like Jimmy's mom, who – with her silvery blonde hair and crinkles at the corner of her eyes- seemed old as time itself. Jonathan and Lilah were younger than his parents, how on earth could they have a granddaughter? Jimmy was beginning to suspect that life was more

complicated than he had originally believed.

The next day, Jimmy helped his mother clean the house, even though he was certain it was clean enough. No one could really see dust unless they were trying to find it, so why was he being made to run a rag over every square surface of the house? His mother had changed the sheets in Sarah's room the last time she had stayed, why did he have to not only help her make the bed, but have to sit through a tutorial on folding fitted sheets? Nobody could fold fitted sheets. His mother had even said a swear when she tried to do it, which both amused and shocked him. Why would a little kid -a five year old baby- care about a clean house? Jimmy was a full year older- an exact full year, his mother had found out- and he didn't even care what the house looked like.

Jimmy and his parents drove all the way to the city airport the very next day. His mom made them stop at a department store along the way, so that she could pick up a few outfits for Joyce. That was the name of the little girl. Joyce. She was going to start school at the same time as Jimmy, who supposed to show her around. Great. He could hear the taunts in his head, already.

*Jimmy and Joyce sitting in a tree...*

Maybe if he made Benny show her around with him, there would be less chance of them getting teased by Byers and his goons. The odds weren't looking good, though. Byers would tease you for eating an apple instead of an orange.

Joyce was dirty and weird looking, Jimmy decided immediately. He didn't have an opinion on her mother, Louisa. She was wrapped in a blanket, and practically sleepwalking against Jonathan as they approached. She didn't acknowledge Jimmy or his parents, or anything around her really. She just seemed to be in a lot of pain, like she had the flu. No one likes to be friendly when they're sick; Jimmy knew this.

Jonathan told Jimmy to take care of Joyce, which he decided was a very important order from a very important man. Jimmy had seen the pictures from the war, and not just the copies from the magazines, or the framed ones in town hall. Jonathan was impressive



and heroic, so if Joyce was a priority to him, Jimmy figured he ought to do well by her. He took her small, pale hand, even though that hand belonged to a girl. He supposed, in this case, he would make an exception. Her eyes were pretty, and he decided he liked it when she smiled at him.

Once Joyce and his mother emerged from the gas station bathroom, Jimmy allowed that she was less weird-looking. She was wearing the clothes that his mother had purchased, which were still a little too large for her, but at least they were clean. The shoes had apparently been a wash, because she was still wearing the same busted sneakers, which clashed with her frilly new ankle socks. Her messy hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, and Jimmy could see that her large doe eyes were shining with tears.

She was hungry, she missed her Mommy. Was her Mommy okay? Why did they take her Mommy away? Sometimes she got sick like that, but she was always fine in a few days, and then they got to get dim sum from Hang Ah.

Jimmy both wondered why it took her so long to start kicking a fuss, and what-the-heck dim sum was. His parents seemed to know, and his father apologized to Joyce, but they were too far outside of the Indianapolis city limits, but maybe someday soon they would all go back and see if the Mandarin Inn had what she was looking for.

"It's okay. We only get dim sum when Mommy feels better."

"Do you like burgers, sweetie? We can stop at a place that has some great food."

Jimmy perked up at his mother's offer. They never went out to eat when it wasn't a Sunday, not ever, and the place they always went to was stuffy old Lorraine's, which smelled like old church people. The food wasn't that great either.

Joyce nodded in the affirmative, albeit without any real enthusiasm. Ten minutes later, she was asleep in the car, her head resting on Jimmy's shoulder. His fear of cooties rose up in his chest, but abated when he remembered his promise to Jonathan.

"She likes you, Son. Good for you," his dad teased, which prompted a scowl and a scoff.

Joyce

Joyce awoke when the car came to a rolling halt in front of a diner in the middle of what she assumed was a forest. She noted, with a sleep-dulled sort of curiosity, that the trees in this new place were very small. Not like Muir Woods with its towering Redwood trees. She wondered if she would ever see her trees, or her ocean, her Hang Ah ever again, or her Mommy ever again. For now, she had to be content with smaller trees, lakes (which Mr. Hopper assured her were beautiful), some place called Benny's Burgers, and a promise that she would see her mommy again soon.

The boy, Jimmy, helped her out of the car, and guided her towards the diner. She liked him; he was tall for his age, and Joyce thought he was handsome. Well, maybe not handsome, but certainly very chivalrous. She didn't really care for burgers, but she had noticed how happy he looked when his parents mentioned them, and she thought that being agreeable was the nice thing to do.

While in the diner, she couldn't say she cared for the way the little boy behind the counter stared at her. He kept looking back and forth from her to Jimmy, as though he was demanding an explanation.

"Knock it off," Jimmy growled through a mouthful of fries. Mr. Hopper swatted him on the back of the head, which gave Joyce a start.

"Did you leave your manners at home, James?"

"Benny keeps staring at Joyce 'n me."

Joyce noticed Mr. Hopper stand up and wave Benny over to the table. The boy jumped down from what Joyce assumed was a crate, and walked over to them.

"Benny, this is Joyce. Joyce is going to be staying with us for a while, and she'll be starting school with you boys in the fall."

Benny greeted her, shyly. "Sorry about staring. See you around, Hop."

The last bit had been directed at Jimmy, which perplexed Joyce.

"S'my nickname."

"Please chew your food," Mrs. Hopper chided.

Joyce shrugged, and went back to eating. The food wasn't bad, after all, and Jimmy's parents let her share a chocolate malt with him afterwards.

Later that night, Mrs. Hopper helped Joyce get ready for bed, and ushered her into a room that seemed to be bathed in Pepto Bismol. The wallpaper was blush colored, with deep pink roses. The dresser, the bed-covers, the writing desk... Joyce had never seen so much pink her in entire lifetime, or so many ruffles.

"This is Sarah's room. She will be home in a few days to see your Mommy, but she won't mind you sleeping here in the meanwhile," Mrs. Hopper explained.

"It matches my pajamas," Joyce murmured. Mrs. Hopper rumbled her hair and chuckled softly.

"I hope you like the new clothes. We'll go into town tomorrow and pick you up some shoes that fit."

Joyce shrugged, and walked over to the bed. "Good night, and thanks," she stated, without turning back to Mrs. Hopper. There was a gentle click of the door, and Joyce was alone. After good hour of staring sleeplessly into the painted faces of Sarah's impressive and terrifying doll collection, she decided to seek rest elsewhere. It wasn't that she was a scaredy-cat baby, it was just that she always shared a bed back at home. To be alone at night was an alien concept to her.

She walked down the hallway, following the tell-tale trail of nightlights leading to the door at the far end. She assumed she had come to the right place, considering the giant blue letter 'J' hanging from the door. She pushed it, and walked across the room to the twin bed on the other side. Jimmy was already fast asleep. Joyce whispered his name softly a few times, before uttering a firm "Hop!" He jerked awake, and stared at her with wide eyes.

"What the heck?!" He whispered loudly.

"Can I sleep here?" Joyce inquired.

"This is a boy's room, Joyce."

She felt tears burning in her eyes, and her lower lip started trembling on its own volition.

"Cripes! Shhh... don't cry, or we'll both be in for it! You can stay, Joyce. It's okay." Jimmy moved over, and patted the mattress invitingly. She crawled in next to him, and gave him an impulsive hug.

"J-just don't do that in front of people when we go to school - Byers'll torture me."

Joyce settled against the pillow and frowned. "Byers?"

"He's a bully and a... an asshole." Jimmy lowered his voice several octaves on the word 'asshole'. Joyce figured that he didn't want to get in trouble, but also couldn't think of a nicer way to describe this Byers kid. She didn't mind cussing, although she didn't really do it herself, unless you counted the ones she knew in Cantonese.

"He sounds bad."

"Don't worry about it. I won't let him hurt you."

Shortly after, they both fell asleep. Mrs. Hopper woke them the next day, and if she was sore about the fact that Joyce had wandered into Jimmy's room, she didn't say. She slept there every night until the man who said he said he was her grandfather came to take her next door.

Mommy looked tired and pale when Joyce ran into her arms. Her Mommy was crying, too. Big, wet tears that made Joyce's hair stick to the side of her neck.

"I'm sorry, Baby." It was an old mantra, but Joyce believed it. Every time.

### 3. Chapter 3

Notes: Hello! Here begins the last chapter in the 1955 portion of my little story. I hope you are enjoying my weird little plot beastie. If you are so inclined, let me know what you think! I'm definitely listening.

In addition, if you are on Tumblr, and have patience for an old person who doesn't quite understand Tumblr, follow and contribute to strangerthingsfics. Looking for people willing to come up with prompts, shoot the breeze, and share their talents, honestly.

Song credits go to Tennessee Ernie for the snippet of "Sixteen Tons"

Hawkins, Indiana

1955

From the Journal of Louisa Fairley

Somehow, I am back in goddamn Hawkins. Dad is penitent, Mom is dying, and the Hoppers have my kid. Dad gave me this journal for my "drying out". He said that he'd never go through it, he just wanted me to have something that would distract me.

As though he knows the first goddamn thing about what I'm going through right now. As though this isn't his fault. Him and his need to keep up appearances, and his stuffy Presbyterian, establishment bullshit. Anyway, I can't really promise a whole lot of faithfulness, dear journal. I can barely make promises to my kid; however, I will update you when the mood strikes me. You can count on that. See you soon.

I've just got done vomiting in the bathroom of Dad's precious getaway house. Decorated his faux rustic floors with breakfast. Oh well. If anything, my insides being splattered to the hardwood adds authenticity to Dad's faux Hemingway trappings. How can you have all the energy in the world, but still feel old and brittle? I'm going to end up in the same nut-hatch as Aunt Dory if I don't overcome this.

It's so hard to sleep, even though every single bone in my body aches

and hurts and yearns for it. The old man is asleep in the rocking chair outside of my bedroom door. I've finally exhausted him with my carrying on. It's so screwy how he doesn't complain, even though I know he hates this. Hates me. I wish my kid were here. Little Joyce. She would know what to do. I think I would die for a nice cup of ginger tea, brewed by that tiny little angel. I can't remember if Dad remembered to pack our hot plate. I don't think Joyce has even seen a real oven, which probably means I'm a crummy mom. That's exactly what it means. I think I'm going to be sick again.

The oddest thing happened, and I'm just now finding the strength to write about it. I passed out while puking my guts out. I don't know for how long, but Dad is still sleeping in his chair and the moon is still in the same position in the sky. Not long. I felt something while twitching on the cold ground- something ancient, but new. Something that caused the floor to hum and pulsate, even though it wasn't really moving at all, I don't think. Whatever it is, it exists side-by-side with me, and I can't put a name to it. Some sort of kingdom. How do I know it's a kingdom? I really can't be certain, but something is stirring in it. It's surrounding but invisible. Close, but far. I'm terrified and comforted at the same time, like when Miss Lorrie would sneak in Old Testament passages into Bible study. I think I felt God, and I want to be wherever he is.

Joyce

Joyce found that she liked living at Grandpa Jonathan's house. He was very kind to her and her mother, albeit sad ever since they said goodbye to Grandma Lilah in the hospital. She had her own room, which still made her uneasy, but that lessened when she felt her mommy's arms around her, tightening about her frame in time with the rising of the sun. Her mommy was always an early riser, and it seemed, she didn't like sleeping in her own room either.

*"Some people say a man is made outta' mud  
A poor man's made outta' muscle and blood  
Muscle and blood and skin and bones  
A mind that's a-weak and a back that's strong..."*

Joyce smiled into her pillow as her mommy sang softly to her. This had been their morning song for a while now, mostly because it was

always playing on the radio near their bed in San Francisco every morning. Joyce didn't really understand the lyrics, but it made her giggle to think of Mudmen walking the streets, dripping and dragging pieces of themselves everywhere they went. She didn't like to imagine them walking about all muscles and blood though, that was frightening. Scary as the witches she imagined floating through the forest in the night.

"Time to wake up and haul your sixteen ton book bag to school, Joycie," her mommy whispered, tickling Joyce's ribs to make sure that she got the message. Joyce squealed and rolled out of her mother's grasp, landing in a graceless heap on the floor. She got to her feet, grinning.

"Will I like school?"

Her mommy sat up in bed, smiled a lazy smile, and gave an exaggerated stretch before answering, "I don't know, Baby. I suppose I liked it just fine when I was your age. You'll get to meet new friends."

"Like your friend, Sarah?"

Her mommy frowned, and looked down at her hands. Joyce had met Sarah a few weeks ago, but only briefly. Grandpa Jonathan had taken Joyce out for ice cream with Jimmy so that her mommy could have 'alone time' with Sarah. When they returned, Sarah had already gone back home. When Sarah and the Hoppers came to Grandma Lilah's funeral, Joyce's mommy and the other women barely spoke to one another. When Joyce asked Grandpa Jonathan about it, he told her that, "Unfortunately, you are going to find out that in life, there are things that are hard to forgive, Petal." Joyce couldn't imagine that this was the other day, Jimmy was trying to show her how to ride a bike, guiding her through the streets and not letting go of his hold. He asked if she was ready, and she said 'No', but he let go anyway, and she and the bike tipped over into the street. She had been mad enough to punch at Jimmy with a balled-up fist, but he had been so sorry that he was nearly in tears, so she forgave him immediately.

"I'm sure you will make wonderful friends, like that little Jimmy boy and – what was his name? – Bernie?"

"Benny. He's okay."

"Oh, I'm sure. Don't be running around with any strange boys, though. You don't need any boyfriends at this stage, and Lord knows: Men are nothing but trouble."

Joyce wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Ewww, Mommy. That's gross."

"Damn right."

Twenty minutes later, Joyce was bounding downstairs, followed closely by her mommy's heavier tread. The air was thick with the sweet promise of pancakes and bacon, a treat that Joyce was – at this point- very accustomed to. She waved at Grandpa Jonathan, who was reading the newspaper; a paper – Joyce understood- that he owned and operated.

"What's new in the News, Dad?" Joyce's mommy asked, while helping Joyce take her seat.

"Absalom Methodist Church is up for sale. That town is for the birds. Nothing but rednecks and dope fiends now." He took a sharp intake of breath, and looked up at Joyce's mommy, with an "I'm sorry" look on his face. Her mommy just shrugged, and piled her plate with bacon. The entire exchange was lost on Joyce. Grown ups were weird.

After breakfast, there was a knock at the door. Jimmy had arrived to walk with Joyce. Joyce eagerly ran to him, waved at her mommy and Grandpa Jonathan, and set off towards her very first day of school.

Benny met up with them when they were close enough to see the bland little square building in their sights, and Joyce felt rather special, being escorted to school by the two older boys.

Before they reached the front doors, the sound of screeching bike tires caused Benny and Jimmy to pause and roll their eyes. Joyce was confused.

"Hey, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum; what do you have over there, a Freak Show refugee?" Joyce spun around, angrily, ready to confront the taunting voice. It was a boy, taller than both Benny and Jimmy,



and skinnier than them, too. His dark hair was shaped artfully so that there was a little curl on his forehead, and his clothes were shabby but clean. He pedaled circles around them on his bicycle, his thin mouth twisted into a cruel smile. Benny and Jimmy said nothing immediately, but both of them glared at the boy for another couple laps.

"Go sit on a fence post, Byers!" Jimmy growled impatiently. This only made Byers laugh and pedal faster. What started as a wide circle around the three of them was now closing in.

"You're kind of cute, for a Freak," Byers observed, staring at Joyce, who was now trembling with rage.

"Well, you're ugly! And mean!" She shouted, her hands balling up into fists. Byers laughed harder, circling closer, swerving in at Jimmy, and then Benny, who both jumped away. Joyce noticed a large stick lying next to her on the ground. Thinking fast, she picked it up, and on Byers' next pass, she jammed it through the fork of his bicycle. The bicycle came to an abrupt halt, throwing Byers over the handlebars, and to a rest on the pavement after a bit of a skid and bounce. His scream when he was airborne was high-pitched, and tinged with exquisite terror.

She did not get a chance to see him get up from the ground. Jimmy grabbed her by the hand, and pulled her towards the school with Benny in tow, the three of them laughing while running for their lives.

"Gosh! You are a wonder, Fairley," Benny complimented, while holding the door.

Despite their prior agreement to not show affection in public, Jimmy hugged her before letting her go into her classroom. "Please, don't ever do anything that stupid again, Joyce," he pleaded, grave in his tone despite his grin.

They parted ways for that day; remarkably, there were no repercussions from the incident. Jimmy told her that it was probably because Byers didn't want to tell anyone that a girl from the Kindergarten class had messed him up so bad.

Lonnie Byers, for his part, would spend the next few weeks cautiously avoiding the trio.

## 4. Chapter 4

Notes: This one was hard to write. It's the longest chapter so far and things get a little dark from here on out in regards to Louisa and depictions of her addiction.

Warnings for a scene in which matricide is contemplated, and strong language.

Thank you, again, for all of the lovely feedback, and thank you thank you for those who follow strangerthingsfics on Tumblr

Hawkins, Indiana

1961

Jonathan

Jonathan Fairley was bearing witness to the end of an era, and he was throwing a party to commemorate it; or was memorialize the right word? He had dreamed of The Hawkins Herald when he was a boy, saved enough money for an antique jobbing press by the time he was fourteen, and was distributing the first incarnation of The Hawkins Herald to unsuspecting classmates later that year.

There had been quite a controversy over the first few issues. First, it came in direct conflict with the actual school paper – something he had been unceremoniously fired from months before. Jonathan Fairley was considered to be too confrontational and acerbic to work on The Hawkins Hello. Moronic name – he thought. It had been too packed with fluff pieces about Lunch Lady Bea's apple pie, and Neanderthal quarterback Vic Spoovey. Second, The Herald's articles – mostly current events and op-eds on foreign policy- were considered too sophisticated for his peers. His mother- rest her soul- when confronted with his illicit activities, told the Principal that her son had no peers. The Hawkins Herald was resurrected after he graduated from college, funded by the sale of a handful of his early photographs, with a staff of two; Jonathan's young bride and himself. Interest grew, an office was purchased, but the war put everything on hold. Jonathan returned from the Pacific Front with respectability, and a little bit of extra money from his photographs. The staff grew,

readership went up for a while, and the Fairley's were quite comfortable.

Now, between the disappearance and search for his daughter, the prolonged illness of his wife, and his duties to Joyce (who was growing up) and Louisa (who was not), that comfortability was being to wane. The paper had gradually become less profitable, which may or may not have been due to Louisa's reappearance with Joyce, followed closely by another disappearance and subsequent reappearance. Perhaps it was the fact that Hawkins was simply too small of a town to necessitate two newspapers. Either way, the table was set, the champagne was chilling, and Jonathan was preparing to toast to the sale of The Hawkins Herald with his remaining staff, family and friends.

Jonathan stood in his dining room, drinking in the surroundings. Joyce had been up since the wee hours of the morning, flitting back and forth from room to room in her restless, jittery way. She had just turned twelve years old, still a diminutive slip of a gamine. She was beautiful, and intense; too shy to make anything but a small handful of friends. Her teachers all reported that she was intelligent, but was strongly averse to public speaking and class participation. Her writing – though never shared in class presentations unless forced – was sensitive and quietly profound. He was proud of that girl, so damned proud. If only her mother...

"Grandpa, I just got off the phone with the caterers. They are on their way now. I told Lorraine that the party was at six sharp and that I'd barely have time to make sure they got everything right before the guests showed up at this rate!" Joyce cried, rushing into the dining room. She was in a state; Jonathan could tell by her shallow breathing, and the flush of pink crawling up her neck and intensifying in her pale cheeks. He crossed the room to his granddaughter, rested his hands gently upon her shoulders, and bent over to kiss her on the forehead.

"You've done enough, Petal. Go upstairs and get ready. Check on your mo-"

"Aunt." Joyce corrected with ice water in her tone. Jonathan frowned. He wasn't sure when, but sometime around Louisa's second

reappearance, Joyce had begun to disown her mother. It was heartbreaking, but understandable. For all intents and purposes, Jonathan was Joyce's father and mother, in addition to being her grandfather.

"If you like. Just check and see if she's well enough to come downstairs." Joyce rolled her eyes -which was something new and not a little bit irritating- turned on her heel, and hurried from the dining room..

Jim

"Awwww, Jimmy, you look so cuuuuuuuute," Sarah Wyland nee Hopper teased as *Jim* stomped down the stairs in his suit and tie.

"It's Jim now, Sarah. I'm not a goddamn baby!" Jim shouted, prompting an outrage gasp from his mother.

"James! Do you want me to talk with your father when he gets back from the liquor store?"

"No, ma'am," Jim replied, trying to make his deepening voice sound meek. He snuck a glare at his sister, and tugged at his itchy collar. It was so stupid, having to get all dressed up in a suit that made him look stuck up and preppy, just to go next door to a house he had been in over a million times. To do what? Have tiny cucumber sandwiches and Shirley Temples with a bunch of old people and Joyce. He bet that Jonathan didn't make Joyce dress up all ridiculous. He hadn't even seen Joyce in a dress since she was in kindergarten; if she could wear blue jeans, chambrays or flannels to church, he bet she would. He overheard his mother telling his father that she admired Joyce for sticking to her guns and wearing nice slacks to service. Why couldn't his mom be proud of him for shaking *his* fist at the status quo?

His mother walked up to him and straightened his tie. He now stood at eye level with her, which made her eyes water at times, much to his mortification and confusion. It seemed a silly thing to get upset about, his growing up. Sarah had given her two grandchildren already, and Jim figured that those two – a boy and a girl- would be babies enough for his mother's fussing and coddling. Jim wanted to go about this business of growing up without feeling like he was

breaking his mother's heart. It's not like there was anything he could do about it; there were aspects of it that he could take or leave- not that he'd explain these reasons to anyone.

Recently, he found himself praying to God every night that things would remain stable at Joyce's house. When things got crazy with her moth-... Aunt, Joyce tended to get needy. She would crawl the trellis to his window at night, begging to be allowed to spend the night talking (and sleeping) in his bed. That had been fine when they were just kids, but things had changed.

They changed around Louisa's sixth month of leaving the Fairley, and by then Joyce had seemingly settled into her routine of school and duties at home; her life of just her and her grandfather. She had not come to his room and had not done so for about three months. Now, with his newfound height, voice and... other things, Jim just thought that sleepovers weren't – he didn't know the right word for what they weren't. What it was, was embarrassing-this new change, and when it chose to manifest itself. It was always in the back of his mind that maybe his dad would have answers for him, but – again-mortification kept him largely silent on the subject.

Of course, the night Louisa showed up at the Fairley's front door, Joyce knocked on his bedroom window. He opened the window, and helped her crawl through. He noticed that she was trembling with rage, her usually porcelain complexion tinged with crimson, and her body temperature touched with fire despite the chill in the night air. It was an image he was well acquainted with over the past few years. Louisa had only recently disappeared from Joyce's life, but the occurrence had been a culmination, a natural progression, rather than a surprise.

*Joyce, you can't stay here tonight,* he recalled announcing, moments after she pulled a twig from her mussed hair. In that moment, she went pale; a profoundly hurt expressed flashed about her face before it was replaced with a glare.

*What?* Her interrogative was quiet, and tremulous, but he could hear the outrage underneath.

*I'm sick.* He had the temerity to fake a cough. It was a flimsy excuse,

and he could tell she wasn't buying it.

*Aunt Louisa is back. She's sorry. Again. He took her back to the other house to dry out. Again. I can't keep doing this, and I just want to be anywhere but at that house, with her in it. He's going to let her stay like nothing happened, and I wish she would die, and I feel terrible for saying that. Can't you please just let me stay? Please, Hop... please!* She rushed over to him, threw her arms around his waist and sobbed against his chest, her body flush against his own. Without thinking, he wriggled swiftly from her grasp with such a sudden motion that it caught her off guard, and caused her to trip over her own feet, sending her sprawling sideways onto the floor. He remembered wanting to throw himself out of the window, if it could spare him the look that she gave him from the floor, her amber eyes burning through a curtain of chestnut hair: pure hate.

She stood up, and he tried to put a reassuring hand on her shoulder; she responded by shoving him, and then stomping to the window. He hurried ahead of her and blocked the exit with his body.

*Joyce, don't. You're upset; you'll fall and break your neck. Just stay until you've calmed down. No, wait- I... I'll sleep on the floor. Just don't leave.*

Joyce scoffed at him, turned around, and headed for the door to the hallway. She opened the door with such a violent motion that it slammed against the wall, and shook the very floors. Almost immediately, his parents ran upstairs to see what the ruckus was. Joyce blew past them, ignoring all pleas for her to come back. She slammed the front door and was gone. Then Jim had been in for it.

*What the sam-hell did you do to that girl, James?*

*Why was Joyce in your room? You two are far too old for sleepovers!*

*Did something happen? Awwwww, Christ! What am I going to tell Jonathan?*

Somehow, Jim was able to get a word in edgewise. He explained what Joyce had told him, assured his parents that he agreed that they were too old for sleepovers, and omitted the part about him knocking Joyce on her ass, however accidental that bit had been. His parents

shared looks of concern, and the next day, his mom spent the entire day with Joyce. His dad seemed like he was on the edge of initiating- as Jim heard it referred by boys at school as- The Talk. However, Jim suspected that his father was as embarrassed as he was over the subject, and every time his dad seemed to look as though he was about to open his mouth to dispense life lessons, he just shook his head and muttered, *Later, James*.

That had been two weeks ago already. Joyce had avoided him at school, opting instead to sit with Chrissy Carpenter and Karen Sipowicz at lunch. Chrissy and Karen were moderately popular and in the same grade as Jim; they were nice girls. He figured that if Joyce was going to run with a different crowd while she cooled down, they were better than say, Byers and his pack of Scumbags.

While their school was small, there were plenty of opportunities for Joyce to prevent running into Jim and Benny- who was confused and annoyed by the whole mess. A cocktail party at the Fairley's modest home would be a bit trickier. He hoped she was ready to talk to him again. It was just no good without her.

Jim, his parents, and his sister – sans her husband Paul, who was watching the twins at their home across town- all headed over to the Fairley residence. They weren't the first to arrive; the living room had already accumulated a nice little crowd. Grown-ups in cocktail length dresses, slacks and sports coats stood and conversed, with their high-ball glass in one hand, cigarette or hors d'oeuvres plate in the other. Jim scanned the room for Joyce while Sarah and his parents moved from the front door to greet Jonathan. Jim found Jonathan cheerful, but tired. He always seemed to be so tired lately, all heavy tread and haunted eyes; an Ancient at 56.

"Joyce is upstairs getting ready, Son. She should be down in a moment," Jonathan informed him. Sarah inquired about Louisa, and Jonathan explained that it was unlikely that she would be joining the party, as she was still very exhausted and not at all well. Jim was stuck on the fact that Joyce was 'still getting ready'. It wasn't like her to spend a lot of time preparing to be seen, like some prissy fussbucket like Karen Sipowicz. Maybe it wasn't so good that she was spending time with those girls. In his irritated musings, Jim plain forgot that he actually liked Karen and Chrissy. More than 'liked'



Chrissy, if he were to be honest.

A noise at the top of the stairs briefly caught the rest of the party's attention, but held Jim's long after they all went back to their booze, complex conversations, and Lucky Strikes. Joyce was standing where the noise originated from- she was the noise. She was wearing a wide, navy blue headband in her hair, and a matching boat neck dress with lace elbow-length sleeves, and a flared skirt over tulle. The dress fell right below her nyloned knees, and to Jim's astonishment, she was wearing navy blue pumps. She had once told him that she'd rather eat dirt and razor blades than wear shoes with heels that no one could run in. Once Jim got over the fact that Joyce was in a dress, he found himself admitting that she looked very pretty in it. More than pretty.

Joyce was still standing at the top of the stairs, and Jim could see that she was apprehensive about descending into a small crowd. He knew this was an ongoing fear of hers, and he automatically moved to the landing of the stairs, ready to help her in any way that he could.

## **Joyce**

"If you like. Just check and see if she's well enough to come downstairs." Joyce nearly growled at her Grandpa Jonathan when he replied with his indifference-laced edict, but she obeyed it; albeit with a little more attitude than she usually treated her grandfather with. She hoped her stomping shook the foundation of the house.

Joyce's relationship with "Aunt Louisa" had begun to sour around the time she turned nine years old. It was around then that she became more aware of the things being said about her family, outside of the vacuum of The Hoppers, Benny's Burgers and her own home. Hawkins was a small town; there were only a small handful of 'problem' citizens. If you had so much as a drinking problem, everyone knew you, and they knew what your particular poison was. It did not take long for people to figure out that Louisa was recovering from heroin addiction, especially when she would come back from day trips to wherever and then go to work with her pupils in pinpoints, and her speech slurred. Grandpa Jonathan would apologize to whatever store or restaurant hired her under his

recommendation, and then he would hie her off to the house by the woods. Parents knew; Parents talked. Children listened; Children teased. Joyce began to learn what it was like to be judged on something that was not her fault at all. That good families came from pedigrees, and with a father dead from his vices, and a mother unwell from her own –*and no vows spoken between the two before her father died!* - Joyce was little better than a junk-yard dog to most people in Hawkins.

Joyce needed to control the narrative. "Aunt Louisa" came to pick her up from Girl Scouts a half hour early one evening, barely walking in a straight line, and fawning over Joyce and the other girls with a dithering, incomprehensible diatribe of devotion. The inevitable *Isn't that your mom?* was asked from one of the mortified children, and without a moment's hesitation, in full earshot of Louisa, Miss Carol, and ten scouts, Joyce replied:

*No. She's my Aunt, and Grandpa Jonathan is supposed to pick me up, but I think she's confused.* She remembered the look in Louisa's eyes, even though it only appeared for a fleeting moment; a very sober, very comprehending flash of agonizing heartbreak. The room had gone silent and thick with confusion, waiting on Louisa's confirmation of the statement.

*I guess I do remember him saying that this morning. Sorry, Niece.* Louisa had turned, and walked out of the church basement, bearing as straight as a ramrod. Later on, back at home, Joyce had argued bitterly with her grandfather, begging him to send Louisa away.

*It was good enough for Auntie Dor!* She had cried, with Louisa standing in the same room, face hidden behind her hands in embarrassment, repeating *I'm sorry, Baby*, like a mantra. It was not to be, and Louisa remained in the house for three awkward, silence filled years before running off. The funny thing was, sometimes Grandpa Jonathan looked at Joyce like she was the one that merited the disapproval. Like "Honor thy father and mother" was something that actually applied to the situation; chestnuts like that were probably easy for Jesus to follow. There was nothing in the Bible about Joseph being a dope fiend.

Joyce knocked firmly on Aunt Louisa's door. "I hope you're at least

getting ready for the party, since you aren't helping set it up." Actually, Joyce hoped Louisa was not in the mood to come down to the party. There was no response. Joyce pushed into the room, and what she saw dazed her. She felt like she had fallen from a moderate height and landed on her back.

Her mother was passed out on her stomach, familiar yellow tube wound tight enough around her arm that it dented her flesh, and silver tray with the familiar trappings of a Good Time in Louisa-Land scattered about on it. To Joyce's knowledge, it was the first time that *this* party for one had been thrown inside the house, and it made her *furiosus*.

"Why? Of all the days you could pull this... this bullshit!" Joyce hissed. She crossed the room to the bed, and started furiously kicking one of the legs of the frame. "Goddamn it, goddamn it, goddamn it!" The bed shook, Louisa stirred and put a hand over her face.

"Language..."

The dam broke, and Joyce began to weep, covering her mouth to muffle the choking sobs that wracked through her body. She didn't want Grandpa Jonathan to hear, she just wanted him to have his night. "I hate you. I hope you die." She moved closer, and a sinister, traitorous thought crept into her brain: How much strength would it take to turn Louisa over? The vitriol in her unbidden thoughts made her sink to the floor, momentarily sapping the strength from her legs. Her chest and throat felt so constricted that she was sure she would die on the bedroom floor- like invisible bodies were throwing themselves on top of her.

Grandpa Jonathan's voice floated into the bedroom. He wanted to know if everything was okay. He heard banging. Joyce shakily pulled herself to her feet. He couldn't know. She had to pull herself together.

"I stubbed my toe!" She called down. Everything was fine. Aunt Louisa wasn't feeling up to the party, and Joyce assured him she would be ready soon.

"I'm sorry, Baby... I wanted to be done when we came back here... I just wanted to feel Him again..." Louisa muttered from the bed.

"After this party, you're done. I'll drag you to the state hospital myself, if I have to," Joyce threatened as she walked out of the room and headed to her own.

In her bedroom, she donned her navy blue armor, fixed her hair, and applied the war-paint that Mimi Fairley had helped her pick out at the department store. Once properly fortified, she checked in on Louisa, and then made sure the door was shut tight before heading downstairs.

Jim was at her side the moment she reached the landing, and from the look on his face, she knew he sensed that something was not right with her. Sweet, naïve, Hop; he thought she was nervous about the crowd – something that may have been a real bother to her in a different lifetime. He also seemed awkward and wrong-footed about their last interaction. He needn't be, Joyce thought to herself. After a long and carefree day with his mother – one full of all the information she'd ever need to learn about the "changes" he was undertaking- Joyce understood where his mind had been when he tried to turn her away from his room; well, as much as she could understand while listening to Mimi's delicate and roundabout phrasing.

"You look... real nice, Joyce."

"Thanks, Hop. I like your tie."

Then he fetched her some punch, a small plate loaded with hors d'oeuvres and for a moment, Joyce forgot about the disaster upstairs. The two of them disappeared into Jonathan's office, pulled up an extra chair to his desk, and sat down far from the crowd in the dining and living rooms.

"I'm really sorry about pushing you the other day, Joyce. I didn't mean to."

"I know. Your mom and I talked about that stuff, and it's okay, Hop."

Jim nearly choked on a deviled egg. "What?"

Joyce giggled and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's fine."

She noticed his shoulder felt warm, or she felt warm. She was unsure. There was a bit of an electric jolt, thrumming through her fingertips, to the top of her head and down to her toes. It was definitely her that was warm, and she pulled away, sitting back in her chair with her face burning. Jim was staring intently at her.

"Joyce... have you ever tried kissing before?"

Joyce frowned. "No! That's... that's gross."

The awkward, long silence that followed was interrupted by the sound of Grandpa Jonathan saying Louisa's name in the living room. They both sprung from their chairs and rushed out to investigate. Joyce realized what was happening, and wanted to sink into the earth and die.

Louisa was downstairs, and trying to hug Sarah, who was feebly pushing at her. Her auburn hair was haphazardly thrown into a ponytail, and she was wearing a rumpled party dress. Whatever she was saying was not apparent to Joyce, but Sarah kept repeating "It's fine", and trying to turn away. Joyce took Jim's hand in a fierce grip, and they attempted to go back into the study.

"Baby, you look so pretty!" Louisa shouted sleepily. Joyce and Jim froze, unable to escape the madness now that they had been spotted. Joyce couldn't make the party worse by contributing to the scene with a dramatic exit. She felt the familiar panic rise up like bile in her throat, and abate ever so slightly when Jim shook his hand from her grasp, and placed it on the small of her back to make gentle, reassuring circles there. They turned slowly, and Joyce attempted to smile, her lower lip trembling with the effort.

"Thank you."

"This is such a pretty party. Isn't my daughter talented, everyone?" She shouted the last sentence to the stunned crowd. Everyone knew Louisa was Joyce's mother, but they had become accustomed to indulging Joyce on her choice to pretend it was not so.

"Louisa, let's get you upstairs, Honey." Grandpa Jonathan appeared at Louisa's side, gently taking her arm. Joyce's eyes met his, and the

silent language between them told her that he knew what had to be done.

"Dad, I just wanted to feel Him again... I wanted to feel God, and His kingdom, and I can't do it without a little bit of help..."

Grandpa Jonathan shushed her and they headed upstairs. Through the pounding and buzzing in her head, Joyce heard the Hoppers had become galvanized into action by their friend's crisis and they announced that the party was at an end. When the room at last was cleared but for Joyce and the Hoppers, Grandpa Jonathan came downstairs and announced that he was taking Louisa to the hospital that night. Joyce went home with the Hoppers.

When Joyce snuck into Jim's room that night, ready to have a good cry, Jim placed a dividing line of pillows in the middle of his bed to let her pour her sorrows out to him. Neither of them slept much that night.

## 5. Chapter 5

**Notes: TW for scenes of sexual harassment of minor. Thank you so much for your continued support on this beast of a plot!**

### Central State Hospital

1962

From the Journal of Louisa Fairley

As promised, I have been sickeningly unfaithful to you, dear journal. Actually, depending on who you ask, I've just been plain sick. The last time we had our little correspondence, I was home again, wanting very badly to get well. As dear old Dad put it: I'm getting close to thirty. *This isn't cute. It was never cute.* I know that – don't you think I know that? I have a kid who hasn't smiled at me since she was eight years old. I've gone through jobs, boyfriends, and I keep going back to that poison because it's the only thing that helps me feel *it*. I ran from Hawkins because I decided that if I was going to constantly be in that condition, I wasn't going to do it in front of her... or maybe I just wanted to get away from her, and those burning dark eyes that used to glow when I was in the room. I used to hang the moon for that girl, and I let her down, over and over again. No wonder she hates me.

But how can I stop searching for this divine salvation that hovers around me? What is she when compared to Him and His kingdom? More to the point; what kind of sick joke is it that I can only feel Him when I'm either fucked up to the gills or drying out? I was done with this stuff- honest I was! – the first time we came home in 1955. That night in the house by the woods, though. I've tried so hard to forget it, to write it off as some weird quirk of getting that junk out of my system; but it can't be. I had kicked the habit dozens of times before that night, and it was all so routine – viciously painful – but a routine all the same.

I know anyone reading this would never understand the entries from when I ran away to Absalom, and hid out in the basement of that old church, they were mostly a mess of a made up alphabet and crude

drawings, and I can barely make heads or tails of it to this day... but I know you understood. Understand. I got so close in that church that I could have broken through the barrier that separated Him and me if I only knew how. We sensed each other, albeit briefly, and when I pressed my hand against that stone floor that should've felt cold as ice, I felt only heat and salvation. I think our hands were touching, if He has hands to reach out with. I think He does because I dreamed of Him so many times.

At least I think they were dreams. I was standing in a room that was completely black, but not dark. I couldn't see the walls or the corners, just a vast expanse of black. He was standing far away, but close enough that I could see that He was not a man. He is twisted, black, devoid of human features, and absolutely magnificent in size and bearing... but he always faded away before we could reach a mutual acknowledgment.

I've written quite a lot today, and I haven't even given you an update on where I am and how I am. Where: Central State, which has been my home for over a year now. How: Not well. I got the junk out of my system, but they were concerned by how much I talked about Him, even afterwards, so here I remain.

It's not all bad; there is exercise, a little bit of busy work, and shock therapy isn't actually at all what they show on movies. Actually, I'm not sure what it feels like *during*, because I'm asleep when it happens. I do wake up feeling rather nice, once the fog clears. Like I haven't a care in the world. Also, there is a lot to be said for those few foggy moments when I can barely remember my name and my life before this place. There's a peace in forgetting that I cannot recommend enough. And then there's the phenobarbital, which you simply must try if you ever find yourself sentient and no longer a journal. It's putting a dopey grin on my face as I write... or is that the Chaplain?

The Chaplain, dear journal, is a very tall, very dark haired angel of an Irishman named Niall Hansard. I go to him when I to say my prayers, and sometimes just to admire him while giving lip service to worship. I've told him about what I've felt and seen, and so help me God, he's never looked at me the way the others look at me when I say these things. He never says whether or not he believes me. He just smiles that slow, full-lipped smile, places a hand under my chin



and stares into my eyes for long, agonizing minutes. He hasn't *tried* anything; well, not anything physical. You see, in those minutes, where his ice blue eyes burn into mine, I hear something like a radio station that isn't tuned quite right. Lots and lots of static and shrieking, but also his voice. I swear it's his voice.

*Louisa*, I heard him say today, *Louisa, my child, I feel it too*. I, of course, couldn't be sure it was him. When you are stuck in a mental institution for over a year, you tend to doubt your own sanity.

I focused on him and projected a reply:

*Feel what?*

*The twisted God and his beautiful, terrible kingdom. I want to be with him, too.*

*I can't trust this. I need a sign. Have one of the orderlies bring me roses tonight, and then we'll talk.*

I could smell them before the orderly reached my door. That cloying, sickly sweet smell of damask. Yellow. Denuded of thorns. I have a friend.

## **Hawkins, Indiana**

**1964**

### **Joyce**

"Order up!" Benny Hammond junior announced. Joyce finished pouring coffee for the cop at the counter, and made her way to the serving-hatch. The weekend lunch rush was winding down, and she could look forward to Benny driving her home soon. They would smoke cigarettes, complain and gossip about particularly terrible customers, and commiserate over homework assignments – but, for now, they were locking horns in the age old battle of Cook vs. Waitress, where there was no winner, just a constant battle over which side of the kitchen had it worse than the other, and which side needed to pick up the pace a little more.

Benny's argument that no matter what, it was going to be about

thirty degrees warmer in the kitchen than in the dining room. Joyce maintained, that no matter how attentive and sweet of a server she was, Art Moreland was going to find fault in the crispness of his hash browns, and take it out on her. All kitchen mistakes were *her* fault, because no customer was going to be brave enough to walk back into the kitchen and complain to either of the Bennys. Not when both of them topped six foot five, and weighed about 260 pounds apiece. Both men were built like linebackers, and Benny the Younger actually was one. Joyce the Mouse was a much easier target, and because she was the daughter of Hawkins's one and only dope fiend, it was easy to look away when her dark, owl-like eyes filled with frustrated tears.

Joyce wouldn't talk about what was making her job *truly* difficult as of late. It wasn't the juggling act of school, work, home, or the fact that work was becoming the heavier burden in that cycle due to the fact that Grandpa Jonathan had not bounced back very well after his first heart attack. It wasn't the cruelty of some of the customers, or the increasingly severe panic that piled onto her chest like heavy rocks when she thought about serving them on a Saturday. No, it wasn't the cruelty; it was the other attention she was getting.

Joyce, at fifteen, was what most people would consider beautiful. She stood at five foot three, which was about what most people, including herself, expected. Her skin - despite working at a place that specialized in greasy foods, sugary drinks, and chain-smoking patrons- was clear and as porcelain-fair as it had been when she was a child. Her eyes were still large and luminous, contrasting with her fair, blemish-free complexion, her hair was a rich chestnut that curled becomingly at the ends, and her figure was slender and elegant. Customers remarked on her looks constantly; some were kind and reverent... some were not.

Art Moreland, for instance, was known for taking her to task for the quality of the food, and grabbing her ass when she rushed off to remedy the situation. He was Grandpa Jonathan's contemporary, and he wasn't the oldest or the lewdest person she had to deal with. The previous summer, when she was still riding her bike home from shifts, and leaving the diner during the gloaming, Perry Schwan cornered her by the ice machine where her bike was parked, and tried to convince her to give him a kiss and come home with him. His

wife had just been put in an assisted living facility, and Joyce had not been fifteen at the time. She ducked from his advances, and pedaled furiously, all the way home. She didn't tell anyone, but she did beg Benny to start driving her home, telling him that she had nearly gotten run off the road several times. She didn't want to kick up a fuss and lose her job. She needed her job.

The boys at school took notice of her, too. Well, at least one. Lonnie Byers, who at nineteen was the oldest boy at Hawkins High School, and certainly the most dangerous, had stopped torturing Joyce (but not Benny and Jim) around the time she turned fourteen. In fact, he seemed to take an interest in complimenting her and following her around constantly, much to Jim's annoyance. Joyce did not take it seriously; Lonnie had a different girlfriend a week. She did, however, blush when he crashed her creative writing class to recite a poem called "Woolworth's Audrey Hepburn". If he hadn't been so insulting about the quality of her clothing, she would've called it a good effort. He really was a terrible writer, and was trying too hard to mimic a beat poet. She hoped she never had to be told that she was "Sabrina waiting for her Parisian Transformation" ever again. ... but he was really cute.

Later, when she told Jim about it, he swore loudly, and muttered something about teaching Byers not to sniff around after goddamn kids. The next day, Jim came to school with a black eye, and Lonnie with a broken nose. Joyce told Jim he was an idiot for getting into more fights, like the school wouldn't kick him off of the basketball team eventually.

*You know why he did it, don't you?* Benny had asked, when Joyce came to him in a snit, raging about the incident.

*Because he thinks I'm a kid, and that I can't take care of myself. The poem was sweet and-*

*The poem was idiotic, Joyce, and you are too good of a writer to say otherwise.*

*Maybe I like Lonnie. He's nicer now.*

*He's not nice, he's horny, and he's too old for you. Wake up.*

*Okay, fine. He's a little older. I suppose that's why Jim roughed him up.*

*Sure. That's one reason. The other one is Jim likes you. I think he kind of loves you.*

Joyce blushed a deep crimson at Benny's admission. *He didn't tell-*

*No, he didn't, but he's not subtle about it. He broke a guy's nose over you.*

Joyce had been in an emotional tailspin ever since. Jim Hopper was her first and best friend, her Rock of Gibraltar. The only constant in her life, now that her Grandpa Jonathan's health was failing, and her Mother/Aunt, now Louisa Hansard, was rehabilitated but living with her Pastor husband in Absalom. How would they go on with this alteration? Joyce felt like J. Alfred Prufrock, though not old and balding.

*How should I presume?* She asked, breathlessly. Benny, confused but feeling that Joyce was having one of her poetic moments, just shook his head and went to Home Ec.

Now, idle thoughts of Lonnie and his dashing soul patch were taking a backseat to Jim Hopper and his taciturn ways, his large and muscular physique. His baby fat had melted, and he had reached his full height of not as hulking as Benny, but a full head taller than Lonnie. His shoulders had broadened and his hips had narrowed. He had a strong jaw, and sparkling blue eyes, and Joyce wondered if she was the only girl who had noticed this. She doubted it, judging by the covetous gleam in Chrissy Carpenter's emerald green eyes. Joyce liked Chrissy, but she was beginning to feel like a brownie to Tatiana, queen of the fairies comparatively. She felt a niggling sour emotion every time she caught Jim admiring her friend. If only Joyce could be three inches taller, two bra sizes larger, with honey-blond hair.

Naturally, the reasonable course of action was to join the cheerleading squad in order to monitor the situation. In fact, after her shift at Benny's Burgers, she and Benny were heading to The Big Game against Kokomo.

Joyce and Benny punched their cards, loaded themselves into Benny's Camaro, and headed back into town. Joyce dressed into her uniform

in the backseat because they were running late, safe in the knowledge that Benny would not be peeking.

"You should really start tipping me out at the end of your shift, Fairley. I'm not a taxi service," Benny grumbled.

"Get-away money, Hammond?" Joyce teased, straightening her blue sweater, making sure the large H was front and center on her meager chest.

"Please. I'm not going anywhere. I can't score your grades, Einie. I'm gonna die in that diner."

Joyce shook her head, dismissively. "Come on, Benny. You're a football star."

"In a sea of football stars. It's the only way to get out of these shithole, Midwest traps, and the competition is fierce. I haven't seen any scouts."

The gymnasium was packed, Joyce observed. She could feel the expectations of the Hawkins side swell to a fever pitch. This was *the* game, and there were scouts there to prove it. Joyce ran to the outside of the locker room, and softly called Jim's name. It was their ritual for her to wish him good luck before every game. He would rub one of her navy blue ribbons between his palms, before tying it around her ponytail, fashioning a lopsided bow, and then she would give him a quick hug. She never uttered the words, "Good luck", because they had deduced that those words were a death sentence to the success of the game. It was a silly thing, and they knew it was silly. It didn't matter, it was their thing, and Joyce was riding too high on the wings of her realization about Jim to give it up.

Jim poked his head out of the door of the locker room. "You're cutting it close, Joyce," he teased, lopsided smirk on his face. He stepped out into the hallway, and held out his hand for the ribbon. Joyce, acting on pure whim and "Now or Never" attitude, placed her small hand in his, and gently tugged to pull him closer. She stood on her tiptoes, placed her hands on his massive shoulders, pulled herself up with a tiny hop, and pressed her mouth against his. There was an agonizing moment's hesitation before he placed his hands on her

hips, pulled him flush against her and deepened the kiss. The moment was clumsy, cathartic, and over in an instant when his coach bellowed his name. He set her down, and gave a short, awkward hum in lieu of concrete words to express how he felt about the moment.

"Go get 'em, Hop," Joyce uttered hoarsely, before turning and rushing away.

Lonnie Byers was sitting behind the cheerleaders during the game, and Joyce could feel his eyes burning against her neck, or- or he had put it in *that* poem- her slender dove-like column.

"Looking good, Fairley," he whispered loudly. Joyce found herself glaring. How dare he intrude on the aftermath of her first, and most perfect, kiss? She heard Chrissy and Karen giggling, and she shot a venomous look at the pair of them.

"Come off it, Joyce; he's cute," Chrissy teased.

"A little old," Karen added.

Joyce felt mean. "You're a fine one to talk, fantasizing about Mr. Wheeler all day," she hissed, forcing Karen into angry silence. Mr. Wheeler was the substitute English teacher. Nothing had happened, but Joyce knew that Karen spent every class he taught making cow eyes at the poor sap. Joyce couldn't imagine why. He was young as far as teachers went, but he was a bumbling geek that probably didn't know (in the words of Grandpa Jonathan) whether to scratch his watch or wind his butt.

"Jesus, Joyce, what is the matter with you?" Chrissy asked, with real concern in her beautiful tan face. *You like Jim, and you look like Brigitte Bardot*, Joyce wanted to retort. She didn't have time to say anything, because the game was starting.

The game was going well. Joyce, not a sports fan, was admittedly on the edge of her seat as Hawkins stayed neck and neck with Kokomo. Jim kept throwing sheepish glances in the direction of the cheering section, which changed her mood from surly to positively cheerful, until she realized that Chrissy Carpenter was interpreting the looks as being meant for her. *Maybe they are*, the traitorous voice in Joyce's

head hissed. She pointedly ignored Lonnie Byers' attempts at gaining her attention, swatting at his hand when it tugged at her pony tail. She didn't notice Lonnie get up from his seat. Jim had the ball, and was dribbling purposefully towards the hoop, graced with surprising speed despite his almost lumbering size. Her attention was rapt. The game was tied and the clock was ticking down. She didn't notice that Lonnie until he was in the middle of the court, barreling towards Jim, eyes burning with purpose.

"Lonnie, stop!" Joyce screamed, as he gained on Jim, arms outstretched. With a sweeping moment, the Lonnie had yanked Jim's shorts and underwear down to his ankles, and sprinted away, tripping over his feet and landing on his stomach, laughing uproariously at the chaos he was causing. The entire gymnasium was silent.

Jim, face burning, pulled his shorts back up over his hips, and with a roar, launched himself towards Lonnie's sprawled form. The two tussled for a good minute before two referees, and one cussing coach managed to pull Jim off of Lonnie, whose nose was broken once more, and who was grasping about the floor for an errant tooth.

There was chaos in the gym as both teams tried to decide how to proceed. The opposite team's spectators screamed for Jim's ejection, and Hawkins screamed back. Eventually, it was decided that the din was unmanageable, and a draw was declared. Joyce witnessed Jim being ushered away by Mr. and Mrs. Hopper. She made a movement to go and join them, but was stopped by Chrissy Carpenter, who was grinning and blushing becomingly. She placed a piece of paper in Joyce's hand.

"It's my number. Give it to Hop, and tell him I liked what I saw. I figured since you two are always hanging about that this would be safe with you."

Joyce frowned, staring at the paper in her hand. Chrissy instantly looked apologetic.

"You two aren't...? I mean, he told me the other day that you were like a sister to him." Joyce winced at the word "sister". Chrissy seemed to be mortified even further.

"I swear to God, Joyce, if you two are a thing, I would never-

"I'll give it to him."

Chrissy smiled beatifically. "Good!"

Joyce's spirits sunk even lower as three more girls approached her, bearing similar missives. Benny noticed her clutching the pieces of paper in her hand as she made her way out of the gymnasium, and ran up to her.

"What's with the long face? What are those?"

"Phone numbers for Hop."

Benny laughed, bending over and clutching his ample stomach. "Oh my god, you're serious? Byers' little scheme backfired that badly? Did... did you see it? I'm not one to make judgments of other guys, but holy shit! How does Hop stand upright with that thing?" Joyce punched Benny in the arm.

"Shut up!" She screamed. Benny collected himself, and tried to keep a straight face.

"Are you going to give him those?"

"I don't know!"

Benny looked at her with an exaggerated pleading look. "Can I have the ones you aren't letting him have? I'm desperate here." She punched him again, and scoffed.

"Absolutely not! They wanted him to have their numbers, not you. If they wanted you calling them up at all hours, they'd let you know." With that, she stormed off into the parking lot where the Hoppers were getting into their station wagon. Joyce slipped a bit on the ice on her way to Jim, righted herself, finished the journey, and shoved the papers into his hand.

"What the hell?" Jim inquired, browsing through the slips.

"Special delivery from your *sister*. I guess you won't have to be stuck



at home on a Saturday for a while." She noticed Mr. and Mrs. Hopper staring at her with wide eyes. She apologized and bade them goodbye before heading home on foot, ignoring their offers for a ride. She was fuming. Absolutely up in flames with jealousy.

Lonnie Byers pulled up to her in his rattling jalopy, and whistled.

"What do you want?" Joyce asked, not forgiving him for ruining everything.

"It's freezing. You are wearing your uniform. I want to drive you home."

"Get fucked!" She practically snarled. When he peeled away, she regretted her words. Being seen with Lonnie would really get Jim's goat. Next time, maybe.

When she walked into her house, and stormed into the living room, she was shocked to find her mother and her husband sitting on the couch, smiling at her.

## 6. Chapter 6

Joyce

"My goodness, Daughter- you've grown into such a beautiful lass." Joyce, not immune to the allure of an Irish accent ("Darby O'Gill and the Little People" was one of her favorite movies of all time), found her stomach tighten and sour at her stepfather's compliment, despite the soft musicality of his tone. Her face colored angrily, incensed at his familiarity. Niall added, "Well, not when you glare at your mum and me; when you do that you look like the very devil."

Joyce turned to her Grandpa Jonathan, sitting impassively across the room, in his arm chair. "What are they doing here?" She demanded. Between kissing Jim and then finding out she was nothing more than a "sister" to him, and now her mother barging into her life once again, Joyce desperately wanted the night to end. She hated the fact that she was probably going to have to see Chrissy Carpenter hang all over Jim from now on. She hated the fact that she was contemplating Lonnie the Creep. She hated how cold she felt, and she definitely hated the leering gleam in Niall Hansard's eyes.

"Louisa and Niall are concerned that I am not well enough to care for you any longer." The previous events of the night became nothing. Trifles. This was news comparable to a series of haymakers to the stomach for Joyce. She recoiled at the news, nearly tripping on her own feet as she stepped back, her back lightly hitting against a wall.

Lousia started, "Joyce, I understand your reservations, and I just wanted to tell you not to worry. Your stepfather and I are doing very well. He has a congregation in Absalom, and we have a beautiful home nearby. It isn't a big house like this, but it is comfortable." Louisa stood up, holding her hands out imploringly to Joyce, palms up as though expecting her estranged child to fly into her arms.

"Grandpa, you aren't dying are you?" Joyce asked, eyes drawn to Louisa's pleading hands, studying the ivory tipped nails that peeked out from beneath like talons.

"No, Petal, I'm not dying."

Louisa moved forward and attempted to catch Joyce into an embrace. Joyce pushed back against the attempt, and ran to Jonathan, taking hold of one of his hands and clutching it between both of hers before kneeling at his side.

"Please don't let them take me. I will do whatever you want. I will fix the roof, mow the lawn every summer day until I die... I-I won't complain when you want to discuss Tolkien – I won't complain ever! – Grandpa, do. Not. Make. Me. Leave. You." Joyce was unable to control her sobs as they wracked through her chest, and she did not care if she was being unseemly in front of the virtual strangers who wanted to snatch her away from her family.

"I would never make you do anything you did not want to do," Jonathan murmured, kissing Joyce's forehead and stroking her hair. "Never, ever."

"Now see here, Fairley, we've legal rights –"

Joyce turned her glare to Niall and Louisa so violently she felt a sharp pain in her neck. "I will kill myself if you take me from here!" She screamed. "I will!" She felt a tight grip on her shoulder, and looked up to see her grandfather's pale, stricken face. Joyce felt her conscience smite her. God help them all if this interlude gave him another heart attack.

"Louisa... be reasonable, please. You left Joyce in my care; I love her like a daughter. She only knows this house, and Hawkins High School. She has friends, a life, and she's practically a grown young lady. Why would you want to uproot her?" Jonathan's voice, once a powerful and commanding timbre, pleaded Joyce's case in a volume that was slightly louder than a tremulous stage whisper, still clear and concise, but weather-beaten.

Joyce saw Louisa blink several times, in rapid succession, before a few tears began to fall from her eyes. The older woman stepped forward with her head down, but her gaze cast up to meet Joyce's.

"I just want to know you better, Joyce. I want us to be a family."

Joyce opened her mouth to deliver another stinging retort, but Niall

spoke up:

"Joyce, you are coming home with your mother and me. It is not up to your grandfather to raise you, though he's done a fine job. This family does not take handouts or charity; we care for our own."

Joyce's temper flared up again. She took to her feet, fists balled at her side.

"I don't even know you! You're just some sketchy priest that met Louisa in a loony-bin-"

"I'm not Catholic, Joyce. I wouldn't have been able to marry your –"

"And *you*, Louisa – what are you even doing here? Why would you even think I'd want to try to be a family with you, huh? We've done this whole thing before: you're going to be on your best behavior for a little, and then you're going to crash and burn with a needle in your arm and think that an 'I'm sorry baby' is going to cut it-"

"Joyce, I have been sober since that party –"

"I don't care! Get out of here – go back to your shitty little church and leave me and Grandpa alone! It will be the best thing you've ever done for me." Not waiting for a response, Joyce turned from her stunned audience and ran upstairs to her room, locking the door behind her.

Half an hour later, enough time for Joyce's breathing and heart rate to calm and her tears to dry, there was a knock on her door. "Petal, it's Grandpa. They're gone."

Joyce unlocked the door and immediately threw herself into his arms, burrowing her face against warm flannel, and inhaling the scent of Royal English Leather. The fragrance was what he referred to as his 'final indulgence', and had stopped buying it ages ago, but Joyce had insisted on saving up and purchasing him a bottle the previous Christmas.

"Louisa's husband and I reached an agreement. You will stay here for as long as I am living, but I had to give them the house by the woods." Joyce looked up suddenly, eyes wide and mouth slightly

agape. She dropped her arms, and took a slow step back.

"Grandpa, we were going to rent that out so you could have a little bit of money!"

"I'm drawing up the paperwork on Monday. Do not think that this is an excuse for you to pick up more shifts at Benny's. I hate that you are working at all when you should be studying- "

"But what will we –"

"I have it taken care of Joyce. The money I have will last us, with a little bit extra to sock away for college. We will open up Louisa's old room for a lodger, if *I* feel we *need* to."

Joyce nodded, and gave Jonathan another hug. "Thank you for letting me stay."

Jonathan kissed the top of her head and chuckled. "You are the dizzy limit, Joyce. I'm not letting you stay, I'm insisting you do."

Jim

"What did she give you, Boy?" Carl Hopper asked his son as they drove down the snowy streets of Hawkins.

Jim cleared his throat, and shuffled through the slips of paper, all bearing names and phone numbers of several very attractive girls- some of them seniors!- from his school. "Just notes."

"It was very strange how upset she was. Carl, I wish you had insisted on giving her a ride home."

Carl shrugged, "I'm too old to wrangle angry teenagers, Mimi. If I had sat her next to Jim, she might have taken his head off."

"It's so cold out tonight. You and Jim can go back to the school tomorrow to search for her coat. I don't like to think of that poor girl going the whole weekend without one."

Jim sometimes felt like his mother had a higher regard for Joyce than for him. When he pointed it out during his last birthday -wherein the

Hoppers took Joyce to Indianapolis to search for dim sum – Mimi explained that she just missed having a daughter around, and could you please stop pouting and try new things, Jim? He did not appreciate being accused of pouting at sixteen.

It was all so confusing. One minute she was kissing him and cheering him on in her *very* pretty uniform, and the next she was trying to set him up with half the school! The thing about being his sister bothered him. In the back of his mind, he knew it was *possible* he had referred to her as one at some point, but the specifics were eluding him. It had to have been a very long time ago, considering he was regularly disarmed by her smiles and glances lately. Also, the uniform... That had been a bizarre but pleasing development, especially how neatly her joining the squad coincided with him joining the basketball team. In his more narcissistic moments, he imagined her decision had everything to do with him. But his mom was probably more on the nose; Joyce just wanted to make more friends.

Except for the fact that, with the exception of Chrissy and Karen, Joyce had openly mocked the sporty crowd for ages. Why would she want to be friends with people she hated? It was all very confusing, and her lips against his made it even more so. So confusing, but also very, very nice.

Carl Hopper parked the family car in the garage, and Jim noticed a strange car in Fairley driveway as he followed his parents into the house. It was a sleek brown Lincoln Town Car, with rims that shone against the night, and a silver cross that hung visibly from the rear-view mirror. Jim's stomach soured at the sight, left him suddenly winded, and he could not imagine why. Something told him that Joyce was in trouble.

Later that night, he snuck down the back stairs, through the kitchen, out the back door and crossed into the Fairley's lawn. Unlike his own bedroom window, Joyce's had no easy access, so he threw pebbles against it until he saw the light turn on in her room. Moments later, she poked her sleep tousled head out of the window and glared down at him.

"What do you want?" She hissed. So she *was* angry with him.

Interesting.

"What was that car doing in your driveway?"

"I can't hear you. Hold on." She disappeared, and a series of lights turning off and on from the second floor windows to the first told Jim that she was coming outside to speak with him. Sure enough, Joyce emerged onto the backyard lawn with bare feet, dressed in a nightgown of white lawn material and a silken cornflower blue robe with white embroidered flowers that was tied loosely at her waist. Her eyes were raw and red, and her russet hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She looked tiny, vulnerable, furious, and utterly devastated. He would have embraced her right then and there if he wasn't certain he would get a broken nose for his trouble.

"Who was at your house tonight?" Jim inquired.

"Louisa and her new husband, Niall. It was maddening how she refused to make eye contact with him while they were talking. Her eyes were aimed towards the ground, the sky, the left, the right, but not to at him. Whatever the intent, it hurt.

"What did they want?"

"Nothing you need to worry about. It's been taken care of."

"Why did you kiss me earlier tonight?" She finally made eye contact with him, and he recoiled at the hatred burning in her tired eyes.

"No reason you need to worry about. Actually, I'm surprised you're here. Why aren't you getting to third with Chrissy right now? It's what you always wanted, isn't it?."

She wasn't lying, and Jim felt ashamed at the rush of pleasure he felt at the mental image Joyce presented to him in that moment. He did like Chrissy, had for some time, and at the moment, the prospect of calling her up and taking her out suddenly seemed a lot less complicated than the tempest presently before him. A smile had crept up on his face, unbidden, and then disappeared when he saw the tears shining in Joyce's eyes. He stepped forward, and reached out his arms to her.

"Joyce, come on-..." He was cut off when he felt her tiny hands push back against his chest with surprising strength.

"Leave me alone, Hop!"

He dropped his arms, and felt the anger rise within him. "Fine, God damn it! Why don't you just go fuck off, Joyce? You're acting like a spoiled something that a man brat, and I don't know why."

"Fuck you, too, James Hopper!" She turned and ran back to the Fairley house, leaving Jim furious, confused, and painfully turned on.

The next day, Jim and his father went back to the school and located Joyce's coat in the lost-and-found near Principal Fell's office. Jim returned it to Jonathan, but did not ask to see Joyce. Later that day, he called Chrissy Carpenter on the phone, and the two made plans for their first date.

Joyce had also been making plans over the weekend. Jim found out through the grapevine she was seeing Lonnie by that Monday. Coincidentally, that was the day Jim broke two bones in his right hand. He claimed he had fallen in the locker room shower, but the slight dent in the door of his gym locker told a different story.



## 7. Chapter 7

Note: The song referenced in this chapter is "You Don't Have to Say You Love Me" by Dusty Springfield

Absalom, Indiana 1966

Louisa

Louisa Hansard surveyed her purchase, but could not find contentment. The pews were new, shining Cherrywood, fragrant with a faint lemon polish. The once shattered stained glass had been replaced with a scene of her own design, the twisted god portrayed in shimmering onyx glass, heavily corded arms outstretched towards its flock, the petals of its face open and crimson. She could not feel salvation in the iconography. She could not eat. Could not sleep. Not while *he* haunted the threshold of her sanctuary. The Golden Boy. The Liar. Matthew.

The church was finally gaining what could be called a respectable congregation. Men and women from every place imaginable began to filter through the doors in an inconsistent trickle several years back, claiming that they had dreamt of Niall, his soothing lilt beckoning them to his strong arms. The trickle was quickly becoming a deluge, and from that deluge came Matthew.

He was relatively new to the church, and so tall that he darkened every doorway that he stooped beneath. His smile was every bit as charismatic as Niall's, although his features were a gilded blonde in contrast to her husband's raven sleekness. His wife, Gloria, matched him in blonde haired, blue eyed splendor, though she was diminutive and delicate. In her nastier moments, Louisa thought they looked like brother and sister more than husband and wife, and that behind Gloria's Grace Kelley blues, lurked a shark-like void. Dead eyes.

Niall often chastised Louisa for her suspicions, despite the reports she presented before him. Note-taking during sermons and accepting communion with a hand cupped in front of their mouths, as if palming salvation before it reached the lips. Hands that rubbed against slacks and skirts, as though destroying nirvana before it

soaked through the skin. A tempest in a teapot he said. Foxes in the henhouse, she replied.

And then there were the disappearances amongst the miracles. Claudia Ravine made the foundation tremble under the power of her meditation. Gone the next day. Helmut Fritz levitated the baptismal font, lifted it from its perch to the balcony and set it down again. He never showed up for the Monday prayer meeting. Maggie Hill, gone – and her ability to communicate wordlessly among the masses was only matched by Niall's. It unsettled all, but Louisa was the only one to form a theory.

It had to be Matthew and Gloria, somehow. The pair of them and their endless jotting and dodging. How could they possibly converse with the Lord when they weren't accepting communion? Louisa reveled in allowing the paper to melt against her tongue, to feel the warmth of the colors, to dance rapturously in vivid Technicolor.

"He has told me nothing, and I alone can receive direct messages from Him. You know that, my love." Louisa tried to accept Niall's logic. It was true that he spoke to God. There was no way that he could describe the delights of The Other Place, and the ebony comforts within, if it wasn't true.

"Why would I have these doubts?" She asked later in an un-tinted moment. It was becoming a real problem, one that seemed to block her access to The Other Place, no matter how many times she knelt for communion. She could see the stars and the vastness of the universe melting and blending in front of her, but He was suspiciously absent in these visions.

"He is displeased with these doubts, Love. He misses you, but informs me that all is not lost, but he requires the other half of you."

"You are the other half of me," Louisa replied tearfully. They were lying in bed in the house her father gave her. Their usual home in Absalom was abandoned for the week while they retreated to the house by the woods in a vain attempt to help bring Louisa closer to Him. She curled up tenderly to him, burrowing her face against the side of his neck as he stroked her long, dark locks.

"He wants to see you complete. We've had this conversation many times, and our hands are tied with the acquisition."

Louisa rolled over onto her back, and crossed her arms over her bare breasts, shivering slightly. "Joyce does not want me, and I cannot make her want me," she whispered.

"He says that the time will come where she will not have a choice. The deal only extends as long as the old man's life. There are ways around that."

Louisa sat up suddenly, glaring at her husband with intensity, despite her vow of gentleness. "Leave them alone, Niall. I doubt He is asking me to kill my father." A strong hand wrapped around her slender throat and brought her crashing down upon her back. Niall pulled himself flush against her side, his lips brushing against her ear as he hissed:

"Do not presume to know His will, Woman. If he wanted to reveal his plan to you, He would - but you are weak and doubting. Do not ever presume to tell me what He does or does not want."

Louisa gasped and sobbed and struggled against his grip until he finally relaxed his grasp, bringing his hand back to her hair to stroke it, shushing her with lyrical tones meant to comfort.

"Leave them alone," she pleaded. She meant it. The night she had begged her daughter to come back to her had been exhausting and heart-wrenching. There was no salvaging their relationship, and it was becoming clear to her that the best thing she could do for her child was to stay away... No matter what He had to say on the subject.

"T'was merely a thought, my love. Come now; I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so rough with you. If you can live with His absence a while longer, that's fine."

It had to be. His hands on her neck hadn't frightened her. It wasn't the first time it had happened, and it was not likely to be the last... it was the fresh insight into his capabilities, her husband, her man of the cloth. His hands were made for illustrating points, sweeping and

swooping from one revelation to the next. His hands were made to occasionally bruise when Louisa stepped out of line; but it never occurred to her that he could ever use them to kill.

"I can wait."

"I'm not a murderer, and He has not asked me to become one, Sweeting. It was not a kind thing to dwell on." He cupped her cheek, and turned her face to his, kissing her deeply. "Besides," he kissed her eyelids, her cheekbones, and the tip of her nose. "You probably won't have to wait long, even without that extra push."

Hawkins, Indiana

1966

Jonathan

Jonathan Fairley carefully set the school cameras back into their cases, placed them in the cheap pine cabinet in room 145 - scarred with age, misuse, and the occasional curse word- and locked the door. Hawkins had hired him on as a part-time photography teacher back in '64, with the occasional stint as a substitute in the English department. It offered a tidy little income, enough to add a few creature comforts to the household.

Despite the fact that he had originally been convinced that he would hate this new turn of events in his life – teaching had not even been something that appealed to him – Jonathan was pleasantly surprised with how much his new line of work suited him. There were a few cut-ups in every class, of course. Lonnie Byers, though long gone from the school, existed in the heart of every child who skipped class or attempted to steal one of the school's cheap cameras. Who, when asked what they wanted to do with their newfound skill in photography, cheekily replied that they wanted to work for "Playboy". Jonathan handled them with a listening ear, a firm, calm voice, and the occasional wise-crack. He wished that he could extend that patience and camaraderie to the real Lonnie Byers, but when he looked into *that* man's narrow fox-like face, all he could see was Joyce's father, the man who ruined Louisa's life.

Joyce had been seeing Lonnie for close to two years, but not consistently. Jonathan could not count the amount of times Joyce came home from school or a dance, tearful or outraged over some new heartbreak perpetuated by her 'boyfriend'. He was clever enough to fill in the blanks when her saturnine moods yielded no answers. He knew what was being said around town, especially now that he was working at the High School. Lonnie was pressuring Joyce to do something she was not prepared to do, and when his attempts at coercion proved fruitless, he went on the prowl. If the local rumor mill was anything to go by, some of the girls Lonnie ran around with were younger than Joyce. The thought disgusted Jonathan, but the fact that his brilliant girl kept going back destroyed him.

He wasn't going to stop her, though. The parallels between her and her mother were so immense, that Jonathan was terrified of what would happen if he forbade Joyce to see Lonnie ever again. The only thing he felt comfortable doing, in terms of keeping her in line, was warning her about the dangers of falling grades, and taking her to the city to get put on "The Pill". Joyce had been mortified at the idea, and swore up and down that there was simply no reason for her to be on birth control. Jonathan thanked her for her candor, but insisted. He just wanted her to be safe if that bastard ever got his way. Convention be damned, he even placed several condoms on her nightstand, once. She didn't talk to him for a whole day after that, averting her eyes and blushing clear to her roots every time she was in the same room with him. If his unintentional form of reverse psychology was working, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

As Jonathan drove home in the dark, the roads icy and his windshield wipers expelling the wet flakes of snow (winter had decided to have one final say that April), he found himself regretting his estrangement-by-association with the Hopper family. Joyce and Jim had stopped talking to each other around the time she started dating Lonnie, and after a few disastrous attempts at social visits and backyard barbecues, Jonathan saw Mimi and Carl less and less. It had just been so damnably awkward, the way their children either glared silently or fought loudly when they were in the same room.

The culmination had been a Fourth of July party in which Joyce showed up with Lonnie, both reeking of cigarettes. Joyce had

attempted to keep the two young men separated, she and Lonnie hung around by the fence that divided the Hopper and Fairley property. The tactic appeared to be working, and Jim seemed to be occupied with the task of being solicitous towards his own girlfriend, Joyce's friend Chrissy.

No one begrudged the older boy a beer. He was 20 years old, a man in the eyes of the law. However, it irked Jonathan how Joyce always seemed to be the one playing fetch for her beau. Over and over again. Then Lonnie got stupid and slurring and handsy, and not in the loving way. The pair had the attention of the entire party when he started to raise his voice to her. Joyce had refused to get him another beer, stating that she was concerned about him driving home that night. He said something about staying at her house, and she refused that as well, which had been the breaking point. Before anyone could intervene, Lonnie shoved Joyce in full view of the party. She tripped over her feet and landed on her bottom. All she could do was stare up at him in astonishment for a few moments before Chrissy ran to her side to help her up. The blonde told Lonnie to go home and sleep it off, and before he could come up with a reply, he was tackled to the ground by an enraged Jim.

Jonathan and Carl rushed to intervene, though they did so with a heavy air of ennui. Jim and Lonnie had been at each other's throats since grade school, and pulling one boy off of another was beginning to feel routine. The fights were getting more and more vicious the older the pair became, and Jonathan took an elbow to the face from Jim for his troubles. It had been an accident, but it caused Joyce to fly at Jim, pummeling him with her fists, spewing out a slew of obscenities Jonathan hadn't realized she knew. Once Chrissy had managed to pull Joyce away from Jim and calm the girl down, the Fairleys left the part, and Lonnie peeled away in his pickup truck. That had been the last time the families had attempted to sit down socially. Carl and Mimi bore Jonathan no ill will, and vice versa, but no one thought that another attempt at civility was advisable.

Jonathan wished things were different. He longed for the days when Jim and Joyce had been inseparable, and both families had expressed hope that the pair would someday allow their friendship evolve into something more romantic. Jonathan knew Mimi practically expected

Joyce to be her daughter-in-law when the two children finished college – she had even confided to Jonathan that she could not wait to see how beautiful her grandchildren would look, if ever such an event occurred.

Instead, Jim was with Chrissy, who was, by all accounts, perfectly sweet and kind, and Joyce was with Lonnie, whom everyone seemed to be polarized about. Jonathan thought he was a lazy, no account, jackass who couldn't seem to hold down a job or treat Joyce with respect, although many young people, and some adults, in the town thought he was downright charming. Jonathan had overheard Joyce's friend Karen refer to him as a "dreamboat". Jonathan didn't much like Karen and her flighty ways.

The last thing Jonathan thought before his arm went numb and the lights went bright was how glad he was that Joyce was, when it came down to it, a smart, steady girl. Then he did not think much of anything, save for how much pain he was in, and how loud the tires were squealing before his car wrapped around a tree.

Joyce

*You don't have to say you love me*

*Just be close at hand*

*You don't have to stay forever*

*I will understand*

*Believe me, believe me*

*I can't help but love you*

*But believe me*

*I'll never tie you down*

Dusty Springfield crooning voice floated faint and weak from static from the radio in the Lonnie's pickup truck as Joyce shivered in her bra and panties on top of a thin blanket on the truck bed. Lonnie had used a tarp to create a tent-like shelter from the freezing weather,

although he had neglected to provide much in the way of sleeping bags. *We won't be here that long*, he assured her. The wind threatened to tear the tarp off into the woods, slapping down like whip lashes against the material.

Lonnie was panting at her side, swearing under his breath as he groped for his clothes. She had disappointed him once again, this she knew. Joyce thought for sure that she would be ready for him that night. He had been so kind to her over the past few weeks, picking her up from school, giving her his full attention, it had seemed right, until it wasn't.

For one thing, when he assured her that he would take care of everything, she didn't imagine that the setting would be a mile deep in the woods, in the bed of an F-150. They had been together for a long time, and he was finally working a steady job at the local plant. Joyce was not materialistic by any stretch of the imagination, but she had hoped for a clean hotel room, at the very least.

Lonnie's struggle to find "inspiration" in the freezing truck had also bought Joyce time to think. She thought the numbness in the tips of her toes and fingers were a distraction. She thought that his kisses were sloppier than usual, a fact that was enhanced by the fact that his saliva was cold against her face. She thought he was pinching harder than usual, which was unbearable considering what he was pinching. It just was not the night she imagined, which was what she told him as she gently pushed at his shoulders to halt his overtures. When that didn't work, she pushed harder and repeated herself in a firmer tone. When that didn't work, she threatened to knee him in the balls, which finally did.

He drove her home, glaring into the darkness like he would cheerfully strangle her if he could. Joyce spent the fifteen minute drive studying her fingertips. It was strange, her feeling that she was letting him down so terribly. She had started dating him ages ago, without a thought of loving him. She had just wanted to make Jim angry. After a few weeks, she had found herself responding to Lonnie's charm, his demeanor, his carefree attitude towards everything and anything.

They had fun, and he made her forget her grandpa's failing health,



and her irreparably damaged friendship with Jim. She liked laughing with him, and she liked to hear him laugh. It was so cavalier and infectious, like he was Errol Flynn reincarnated. He encouraged behavior in her she never thought possible. Cutting class to have lunch by the quarry, laughing and coughing through a cloud of Lucky Strikes until her sides ached. Sneaking out past dark to explore the woods and shine flashlights on fairy circles. His poetry was not even that terrible after he allowed her to introduce him to the minds of Keats, Elliot and Cummings. She did not mind it when he called her his Cathy, even though deep down she despised *Wuthering Heights*. He was a bit of a Heathcliff. All wildness and fluctuating moods and a blatant disregard for societal norms. She did not have it in her to argue with him that Charlotte was the more talented Brontë. Baby steps.

She loved him, but she could not bring herself to give him the one thing he wanted from her. The one thing that might possibly keep his roving eye in check. The time had to be right, the setting had to be perfect, and she had to stop dwelling on the fact that Jim and Chrissy were no longer a thing. That Jim would never be an option, especially now that the notches on his belt were beginning to rival even Lonnie's.

Lonnie pulled into Joyce's driveway, and they both gasped at the sight of the police car. Joyce, sensing that something catastrophic had occurred, flung open the passenger side door to the truck, and ran for her front door. The fact that Lonnie peeled out of the driveway like the hounds of Hell were at his heels did not even register with her. When she got closer, she spied Officer Banks having a conversation with Carl and Mimi Hopper, Jim was standing slightly apart from the concerned trio. When he spotted Joyce, he rushed over to her. His face was wan, and his eyes were red.

"Thank god," he uttered hoarsely before pulling her into a tight embrace.

"Hop?"

"When they found Jonathan's car, they thought you might have gotten thrown –"

"Jim, what are you talking about?" Her voice was slightly muffled against his chest, and she pushed him away.

Joyce could make out the words "Jonathan" "heart attack", "hospital", and "alive" through the deafening roar in her ears. She felt his arms close around her before she hit the ground.

## 8. Chapter 8

Hawkins, Indiana

1966

**Jim**

Jim Hopper shifted his weight in the uncomfortable plastic high-backed chair he was sitting in. It occurred to him that the waiting room in the hospital had not been designed for maximum comfort. It was as if whoever had designed the layout wanted concerned families to have their minds on one thing and one thing only: the loved one suffering and dying down the hall. He stole a glance at Joyce, who sat silently, eyes fixed in a faraway look. Impassive and impervious to discomfort in her fathomless reverie. Despite it all, he said a silent prayer of thanks over the fact that she was sitting there next to him, and not getting cut open on an operating table, clinging to life as her Grandpa Jonathan was. He reached over and touched one of the slim hands that were clutched together in a tight vice on her lap. She gave a start and turned her head towards him. The unshed tears gave her large eyes an appearance of glowing amber.

"Can I get you anything?" He asked softly, hoping the answer was yes. He needed a task, anything, or else he felt like he would go mad. He saw her gulp and nod.

"A water." Her voice sounded raspy, like sandpaper rubbing together, and he had to strain to hear her, even though they were sitting so close he could feel her shoulder pressing against the middle of his upper arm.

"Food? Joyce, we've been here for hours, you need to eat."

"Just a water."

"Okay." Impulsively, he pressed a kiss to her forehead, and he could have sworn she leaned into his touch. Best not to dwell on that, he thought, standing up and shaking the stiffness out of his long stationary limbs.

Despite her request for just water, Jim found himself getting one of everything from the vending machine down the hall, plus a water for Joyce, and a Coke for himself. While awkwardly bearing the offerings in his arms, he encountered Louisa and Niall Hansard in the hallway. The pair were heading for the waiting room.

"Jim Hopper, look how big you've gotten!" Louisa exclaimed as Niall reached out his arms in a sign of assistance to Jim. The younger man backed away with a frown and shook his head.

"I've got this, thanks." He did not acknowledge Louisa. Somehow, he felt, conversing with her would be a betrayal to Joyce. "Joyce is really upset, and I can't imagine the pair of you would help," he added, keeping his eyes fixed on his armful of treats.

"My wife's father may be on his deathbed, son. She has a right to be here."

"Don't call me son, and don't upset Joyce with talk of her staying with the pair of you. If you bring it up even once, I'll break your pretty boy face, Padre."

"I'm not a pr-..." Jim turned away from the pair, and headed into the waiting room, his shoulders and jaw tense as a piano wire. He set his purchases down on a coffee table in front of Joyce, and handed her the water with an apologetic look. She took it with a quizzical expression until she spotted Louisa and Niall walk into the room, then her face turned cloudy. Jim stood next to her, taking on a protective stance. Jim's parents took note of the visitors, and stood as well, eyes trained on Joyce with concern over the proverbial powder keg at hand.

"How is he?" Louisa asked.

"Who called you?" Joyce demanded, ignoring the question. Jim glared over at his father when the older man cleared his throat.

"I did."

"Dad!"

Carl Hopper raised his hands in front of him, palms upraised in a

gesture that said 'take it easy'. "James, Louisa is Jonathan's daughter and Joyce's mother. She deserved to know." Carl walked over to Louisa, took her arm, and gently guided her to a seat near Mimi. The older couple had been sitting across the room from Jim and Joyce, and Jim deduced that the choice had been tactical.

"He's in surgery. Unfortunately the accident coincided with a fairly major heart attack... It's not promising." Jim felt his stance soften at the sight of Louisa's crumbling at the news. The older woman swooned slightly in her seat, and then covered her face with her hands, kneeling forward and immediately falling into sobs. Niall knelt at his wife's side and began to stroke her back, murmuring soft endearments too soft for Jim to discern. Jim looked over at Joyce, who had her face turned away from the scene, face fixed in an expression of enraged indifference, but wet with tears all the same. He felt wrong-footed and ineloquent, looming over the scene of grief and repressed vitriol. He sat down next to Joyce, opened his Coke, and took a long swig that hurt his throat on the initial pull.

The wait went on for another hour. Mimi, Carl, Louisa and Niall on their side of the room, discussing how to move forward. Despite the estrangement between the families, Carl was Jonathan's power of attorney, a position he had kept since the first sign on Jonathan's health going south. Jim attempted to distract Joyce from the conversation by pulling out a deck of cards, and the two of them engaged in several rounds of War, with Jim losing soundly on every single go. Grief had not dulled Joyce's deft skill at card games, even with Jim trying in earnest to best her. He had no pretensions of allowing her to win in an attempt to cheer her up – Joyce would know, and she would not appreciate it.

Something unexpected happened when the news broke that Jonathan had made it out of surgery. Joyce began to wail in broken down relief at the doctor's words, which was not so unusual, except that Louisa stood up and ran to her daughter. All witnesses tensed, waiting for the explosion they all expected. It did not happen, as soon as Louisa knelt by her child and threw her arms around her, Joyce responded in kind, pushing herself from her chair, and wrapping her arms about her mother's neck, nearly bowling the older woman over backwards. Jim watched in astonishment as the women clung to each other,

Louisa spouting out a litany of apologies. He had to sit down suddenly when he heard Joyce tearfully call Louisa, "Mommy", as Louisa rocked her gently.

The spell was broken when Niall stood up and walked over to his wife and stepdaughter. "That's mighty fine," he murmured in a way that Jim did not particularly care for. The Irishman sounded patronizing, artificially touched by the scene before him. Mother and daughter parted at Niall's words, standing and straightening through sniffles and hiccups. Jim found it interesting that Louisa was glowering at her husband, her face an open book of disgust and suspicion. Very interesting.

"Maybe Joyce would like to come home with us, given the circumstances?" Niall suggested. Louisa opened her mouth to protest, but Niall silenced her with a dismissive gesture of his hand. Something was not right, and Jim stood up, hands tightened into fists.

"Hey, I told you not to -..."

"Young man, surely you do not mean to answer for Joyce? She is, after all, her own person." The Irishman smiled appealingly at Joyce. "Come now, young lady. You and your mother needn't draw out this feud any longer. You need each other in this trying time, and I think it's also high time you had a father in your life."

Joyce's spine straightened at Niall's mention of a father. She narrowed her eyes, and lifted her chin in a distinctly haughty manner. "I have always had a father in my life," she practically sniffed. She looked at her mother. "I'm sorry, but I have to stay here until I know Grandpa will be okay. I can't go to Absalom with you."

Louisa nodded, sadly. Niall shook his head.

"Absurd. We have the home in Hawkins. We will all stay there until this is straightened out, and then I insist you come home with us."

Jim could not imagine a worse thing to say to Joyce to convince her of something if he tried. She was not amenable to commands, not even from Jonathan. He took a seat and watched the scene unfold

with his chin propped in his hand and his elbow rested on the end table at his side.

"No," was Joyce's predictable response. She illustrated her stubbornness on the subject by crossing her arms in front of her chest and tapping on foot with her head cocked to one side. It was a dare to escalate the situation. Joyce was smaller than the second smallest person in the room (Louisa) by about three inches, but she postured with the self-assurance of a giant.

Niall stepped moved towards Joyce, his stance immediately readable as threatening. Jim saw Louisa blanche and put an arm out as though to halt him. Jim began to stand as well, ready to step in if Niall decided to act stupid.

"Seems to me like you need a firm hand, girl; Jonathan clearly has let you have your own way in a great deal many things. You are disobedient and headstrong – qualities I find disgusting in young ladies. A few months under my roof ought to remedy that in a thrice." Jim wanted to tear the older man, limb from limb. Joyce, to her credit, snorted and rolled her eyes, utterly unmoved by Niall's display of threatening masculinity.

"Please, what are you going to do?" She glanced at her mother. "You can't cow every woman like you clearly do with her."

Carl stood up, and crossed the room to Joyce and Niall, creating a barrier between the two of them.

"This is not the time or place to have a row, both of you. I am about to be up to my neck in paperwork over this whole mess, and I do not want to add where to put Joyce on my list of things to worry about." Carl looked imploringly to Joyce. "Honey, you can stay with us."

"I was actually thinking about staying with Lonnie. He has an apartment now."

The room erupted in a cacophony of protest.

"Joyce, sweetie, don't make the same mistakes I- "

"...Nonsense, our house has always been open to you –"

"...Joyce, you are like another daughter to me and –"

"... Living with an unrelated man is –"

"... Lonnie? Are you out of your fucking mind?!"

The loud protests ground to a halt when Joyce simply walked out of the room.

## **Joyce**

Joyce rounded a blindingly white corridor, stalking purposefully towards the elevator when Jim caught up with her. He did not block her way, or grab her arm in an effort to halt her movements, he just walked at her side as she made her way to the metal doors, watching her as she nearly jammed her forefinger as she smashed the down button.

"Where are you going, Joyce?" He asked, stepping into the elevator with her. She tried pushing him out before the doors closed on them, but he was too heavy and remained.

"Away from here! I just... I can't just stand there and let other people decide my future." She raked a hand through her wild, auburn waves and gave a shuddering sigh. Jim touched her shoulder and she flinched. She felt as though she would die if one more person tried to touch her.

"Hey, okay, okay... Joyce, it's okay. You don't want to be in this hospital; it's fine. I get it, I hate hospitals too. Your stepdad is a dick, and I get that too. Just don't run off without telling anyone where you are going – not tonight."

The elevator dinged, and the heavy doors scrapped open. Joyce and Jim stepped out into the lobby together. Joyce took a deep breath and turned to Jim:

"I don't know where I'm going." Her voice broke towards the end of the sentence as she gave way to frustrated tears. Jim pulled her into a side hug, and she felt his hot breath against her scalp as he kissed the top of her head. Not the time or the place, she thought, fighting the urge to give way to her old feelings for the boy.



"I will take you anywhere you want to go. I can take you back to my house, or I can take you back to your mom's – though I don't think you'd want that – hell, I will even take you over to Lonnie's." Joyce stepped away from Jim, and eyed him up, skeptically.

"Do you really mean that, about taking me to Lonnie's?" She saw his eyes narrow for a millisecond, but then he schooled his features to appear neutral.

"Well, I wouldn't like it, if that's what you're asking."

Joyce thought for a moment. She knew she would have a safe haven at the Hoppers', but she did not want to impose on the family any more than she was sure she would be doing in the coming months. Her mother's home was out of the question, even if they all stayed in Hawkins; Niall gave her a distinct case of the heebie-jeebies, and always had. There was something sinister lurking beneath his holy façade, something that terrified her even as she had practically laughed in his face moments earlier. She thought of Lonnie, and the inconsistent affection that he bestowed on her. The expectations he had of her as his girlfriend. She was surprised to find that she very much wanted him – his cavalier ways, his easy laugh, and even his roving hands. Who cared what happened when she entered his apartment? He made her feel, and she wanted desperately to feel something other than sickening nausea and dread.

"I want you to take me to Lonnie's."

She saw Jim take a sharp intake of breath at her request, and she wondered for a moment if he would actually honor it. Those two had hated each other since the beginning of time, it seemed; an animosity that predated Joyce. She thought it must be killing him, knowing that his best friend preferred his enemy's comfort to his own, and then she smiled inwardly, pleased that she could rely on Jim to be her friend once again. She had not liked their estrangement at all. There were many days where she heard a joke or a story, or encountered an absurd little thing, and she had wanted to tell him about it, stopping herself when she remembered that they were not speaking.

"Let's go."

Lonnie lived above the town's liquor store, far at the not-so-nice end of Main Street. Joyce had been inside a few times, once to help him unpack, and another time to unwind after a night at the movies. It was a semi-squalid flat in that the appliances were new, but the wallpaper was peeled, and the entire place smelled slightly musty, like a book left out in the rain and brought in to dry by the fire. It consisted of one room and a bathroom, and was so small that Lonnie's full sized bed took up a quarter of the space.

Jim helped Joyce out of his car, and asked if she wanted him to walk her to the door. She shrugged.

"Probably not the best idea... but could you wait in the car in case he's not home?" Jim nodded, his jaw set in a tense line.

Lonnie was home. He answered the door in a pair of jeans and nothing else. He blearily took note of Joyce and then looked over at the street where Jim was parked. The two men shared a tense look before he turned his attention back to Joyce:

"S'matter, kid?"

Joyce turned around and waved Jim away. Her friend nodded and drove away with a desperate sort of speed. Joyce hoped against hope that he did not get into an accident. She turned back to Lonnie, schooling her features into a mask of calmness. "Can I come in?"

Lonnie backed away from the door to allow Joyce inside, following her close behind. "What's the big idea, Joyce? Why was that bastard driving you over here?" He asked, closing the door behind him. Joyce threw her coat on a nearby armchair and turned to him, closing the distance between them and throwing her arms around his waist.

"Shut the fuck up and kiss me."

## **Louisa**

Louisa had been sound asleep when her husband walked into their bedroom, slamming the door behind him. She gave a start and sat up in bed, rubbing her sleepy eyes and allowing them to focus on his sleek form. He was shaking, and appeared agitated. She scooted off

the bed and ran to him.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you in bed?" She inquired. They had fallen asleep together and she had not noticed his absence.

"He spoke to me tonight. We need to get your daughter back. She serves a greater purpose than I originally thought." He shrugged off her arms when she tried to embrace him.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged off his outer layers, leaving them on the floor for her to pick up later. "Never you mind. It will all become clear soon enough. Go back to bed."

"Niall..."

"I won't ask twice." Hearing the threat implicit in his statement, Louisa went back to the bed and crawled in, eyeing him with soft, wifely concern. He changed into his pajamas and settled in next to her, pulling her against him. She could still feel the tremors in his body, but chose to ignore it, fearing what would happen if she pressed the issue. He was asleep within minutes, but she was not.

Things had not been great. There had been more disappearances, and Matthew and Gloria remained a permanent thorn in Louisa's side. She had given up on raising her concerns to Niall, who seemed to be increasingly fixated on the concept of opening the gates to The Other Place. The messages from Him were becoming desperate, Niall had explained. They all needed to go to him and go to him soon. The world was going mad, he explained. Wars that nobody wanted in a place that no one cared about. Good men were dying needlessly. This was not the good place, and somehow it was Louisa's fault that they could not leave, somehow.

The rest of them are going, and here I stay, shackled to you, Niall had bemoaned on more than one occasion. Louisa had serious doubts that those who disappeared were going to The Other Place. It did not seem right, and Matthew and Gloria kept watching, and writing and judging. Sometimes she doubted if Niall was actually speaking to anyone but himself. What god would use such an increasingly violent

man as a vessel?

Now he was focused on Joyce again, which frightened Louisa more than anything. She had often prayed that he would stop it, and just allow Joyce to grow up happy and free of the hell Louisa now found herself in.

She was still awake when the phone rang. Louisa waited for Niall to wake and answer it, as he did not like for her to take phone calls. It rang and rang until Niall swore at Louisa, told her to answer the bloody phone. So she did.

Moments later they were rushing to the car... well, Louisa was rushing. Niall was stalking behind her coolly. Before Louisa stepped in the car, she noticed a dent and a curious smear of paint on the front bumper that had not been there before. The phone call she had taken ran through her mind in that moment. Her father...

No. If she followed that line of thought she would lose her mind. It simply could not be. Her father had had a heart attack and lost control of the car. That was all.

Wasn't it?

## 9. Chapter 9

### Joyce

Joyce Fairley did not feel any different. Her legs were a bit sore, as were other parts of her body, but she did not feel like she had emerged from Lonnie's twin bed with a new knowledge of the universe and its inner-workings. She wasn't wiser, or happier, although for a brief couple of seconds, when he was huffing and pushing against her, she felt like she had some idea as to why people enjoyed the act so much. She had not enjoyed it as much as Lonnie apparently did, with his weird, scrunched up face and his insistence that she had been so... what was the word? Tight. It had been just fine, as far as satisfying curiosities went, and she liked how sweet he was to her afterwards, covering her with a blanket and spooning with her until she fell asleep. So that was that.

Joyce rose from Lonnie's bed and threw on one of his white t-shirts. She needed to take a walk around the apartment to collect her thoughts, to imagine her life as his live-in girlfriend. She supposed she would have to tell him about that eventually.

The place really was a small hovel. It reminded her of the places she used to live in with her mother when they had both stayed in San Francisco, distant as that memory was. Maybe they could stay in Grandpa Jonathan's house – keep it nice for the older man while he recovered.

Joyce figured she could sweeten the deal by showing him what a good live-in girlfriend she could be, so she set about the task of cleaning. The kitchen area was a disgusting mess. Plates were stacked so high in the sink that they almost cleared the top of Joyce's head. Figuring out how to remove one without disrupting the fragile ecosystem was a challenge, but she managed to remove and clean them, one-by-one, without waking a snoring Lonnie. When the morning sun illuminated the floor a bit better, she set to scrubbing it.

The clock above the sink read 11:45 by the time Joyce finished cleaning, and Lonnie was still sleeping like the dead. She heaved a sigh and thought that she might never get a chance to reveal their

new arrangement at this rate. She walked into the bathroom, got clean, got dressed, left a note on the fridge, and headed out towards the hospital. The distraction of Lonnie had been nice, but her grandpa was on her mind once more, and she figured that the long walk to the hospital would do her addled mind some good.

Grandpa Jonathan was awake, but barely. Joyce sat by his side and spoke in low, hushed tones. Her eyes burned with frustrated tears when he either replied in a raspy cadence that she could not decipher or did not answer her at all. He looked diminished, dwarfed in his gauze and plaster tomb. The doctor came in and droned on about permanent injuries (brain damage) rehab, assisted living, and a litany of things that made it very clear to Joyce that things were not going to go back to normal. She gave up on talking to her grandfather and fixed her anxious thoughts on the number of tiles on the floor. It was mindless, busy work that continuously got disrupted by staff bustling in and out, obscuring her line of sight and messing up her mental math.

A hand rested on her shoulder, breaking her exercise and causing her to jump. "Easy, Joyce, it's just me." Carl Hopper knelt painfully by her side, his heavy brow knitted in an expression of concern, his clear blue eyes shining and tinged with red. "Jim told us that he took you to a safe place last night, but I wish you had stayed with us. You know you are always welcome at our home."

"I've got it taken care of, thank you." Joyce was surprised at the chilly edge in her voice, and she regretted it the second she saw the hurt in Carl's eyes. Here was a man who had been as good as a father to her, and his wife the mother she had always wanted to have. Their son...

"They want to send him to a rehabilitation center in Indianapolis, you know that right?" Carl's questioning was gentle, and Joyce let him hold her hand as he stood.

She nodded. "They don't think he'll be able to ever come home though."

"It's going to be expensive, Joyce. That brings me to my next point –"

"We have to sell the house." Joyce knew that was where the

conversation was going to go, and she wanted to be the one to voice it – her idea. Hearing it from someone else's lips would crush her. That was the only home she knew.

Carl squeezed her hand, and she heard him heave a sharp and heavy sigh. Her eyes were on the floor so she would not have to see the pity in his. "I thought that there might be a possibility that your mother would want to give up the property out by the woods but Niall –"

"Niall wants his house."

"Well, it's your mother's house but –"

"No. It's his."

Carl sighed. "Then there's the question of where you are going to stay. You're sixteen –"

"I won't live with Niall." Joyce looked up at Carl with pleading eyes. "Tell me that no one can make me live with Niall. Grandpa promised me that I didn't have to live with them for as long as he lived...that's the agreement they made when Grandpa gave them that house."

Carl nodded. "It's in the paperwork. No one was going to make you live with them, though it wouldn't hurt you to make nice with your mother. She seems like she really wants to make things right with you."

"I know. He scares me, Mr. Hopper." Joyce tried her best to express that fear with her face. It was difficult to explain why the man frightened her, but every time – *every* time – she encountered Niall Hansard, she felt a chill that started in the back of her neck, travelled down her spine and around to rest like a ball of ice and bile in her stomach. It went beyond the resentment she held for her mother – Joyce felt that if she went with them, she would die. She did not know how to relay this fear in words, so she allowed the blood to drain from her face, her lower lip to tremble, and her eyes to shine with tears. Her hand tightened around Carl's like a tiny vise.

The older man swallowed hard and studied Joyce for several, long moments. "The place you are staying, the place my son took you to..."

is it safe?"

"Yes."

"You have to keep going to school."

"I know."

"I don't approve of this, and you know your grandfather wouldn't either."

"I know."

"Joyce, our home –"

"That's real nice and all, but like I said, I'm safe."

Both Carl and Mimi tried to press their case to Joyce that day. Joyce had agreed to go to their house for dinner, but made no promise to stay the night. Jim spent the meal avoiding eye contact with her and responding to her queries with monosyllabic utterances. When they were done eating, Joyce helped Mimi clear the table and wash the dishes and then announced that she had to get going.

"Son, why don't you make sure Joyce gets back to that young man's home safely? I don't like the idea of her walking by herself," Mimi announced in a sweet, coddling tone.

"Mrs. Hopper, it's Hawkins, I'll be –"

"Let's go, Joyce." It was the most Jim had said to her the entire evening, and he said it in a flat, tired sort of tone. Joyce did not insist on her need to be alone. Something in his voice told her that there was a conversation that needed to occur. They both grabbed their coats and headed out. The night was mild, so they walked.

Joyce accepted a cigarette from Jim – he seemed less severe than he had during dinner; his mouth was softer and his eyes were not set in that icy glare that terrified opponents on the basketball court.

"What's on your mind, Hop?" she asked in a hesitant tone, once they were a block away from his house.



Jim stopped in his tracks and heaved a careful sigh, one that implied that he was holding back somehow. "Joyce...you're going through a lot."

Joyce nodded slowly and incredulously. "Yes." Her tone was mildly patronizing.

"You really don't need to know what's on my mind, because you don't need to be bogged down by..." He took a long drag and began to walk again, suspending the thought in mid-air and abandoning it.

"Jim," Joyce struggled to catch up, crossing in front of him to halt his movements. "We've been friends for years. Just tell me."

"I really don't want to say what I'm thinking because we are either going to have a fight about it, or we are going to skip straight to not talking anymore. I don't want to do that because I missed you like hell when we weren't friends. It's no good without you, Joyce."

The admission knocked Joyce's world sideways and into next week. Somehow, Jim had managed to say everything without saying much. It was sweet and simple. It was something she had wanted to hear from him since she first became aware that he was something more than the fat, grumpy little boy that she used to follow around and cling to for dear life. She never, ever in a million years thought that she'd hear a romantic admission come out of Jim's mouth, but to say that he missed her, that life was bitter and empty without her...it was as good as skywriting her name with a trail of cloud hearts behind it.

It was also inconvenient. Best to shrug it off. "Fine. I don't want to fight with you either." Joyce turned on her heel and continued on, but was waylaid when Jim took her hand and gently tugged on it. *No, no, no...*

"I just want to know that he's taking care of you."

Joyce groaned before turning back to Jim with narrowed eyes. "I'm with him because he *doesn't* take care of me. I don't *want* to be taken care of. I just want to live my life and make my own decisions without people getting hurt all of the time."

"What?"

Joyce sighed and shrugged. "Bad things tend to happen to people who think that they have to take care of me. Maybe I'll have better luck going it alone...but with Lonnie." She winced when his face fell. "I know that's not what you wanted to hear."

"Let's just get you to his apartment and forget I said anything."

Lonnie opened the door to let Joyce back into his apartment, confusion evident in his sharp features. "I wasn't expecting to see you today, kid."

Oh, that was right. "We have to talk," Joyce announced, sitting at the edge of his bed and patting the space at her side, invitingly. He sat with a small smile, his eyes wide with bemusement.

Joyce proceeded to tell him everything. Her grandfather's accident, her misgivings about her stepfather, the fact that she was about to lose her childhood home. By the time she got to the point – asking if she could live with him – she was speaking through stammering, hiccupping sobs. She felt Lonnie's arm wrap around her shoulder, and she leaned into his soothing touch.

"Take it easy, sweetheart," he cooed. "Let's get your mind off of that for a bit." So he did, the only way he knew how.

They continued on that track for the entire weekend – Joyce wanting desperately to have some confirmation that she could stay, and Lonnie redirecting her attention with slow, sweet kisses and sometimes frantic lovemaking. He told her how much he loved her intensity, considering she had only recently lost her virginity. "Most virgins aren't so..." he trailed off when her eyes narrowed and her face flushed with suspicious anger. He managed to guide her off that train of thought too, but just barely.

Sunday rolled around and Joyce pressed her case once more. "Can I assume that I'm allowed to stay with you?" she asked, swatting his hand away from her chest as they lay in bed.

Lonnie groaned and sat up. "Kid..."

The alarm bells went off in Joyce's head, and her pulse began to race.  
"What?"

"Well, I suppose I should have told you ages ago, but I'm leaving town. Tomorrow."

"Excuse me?"

Lonnie shrugged and leaned over the bed to grope about the floor for a t-shirt and jeans. "We weren't going anywhere, Joyce. For years... just nothing between us. I happened to meet this chick a few weeks ago, and she wants to go to California. She's kind of amazing."

"*Weeks?! The night of my grandfather's accident, I was in the backseat of your truck ready to –*"

"I wanted to give you one more good time after everything."

Joyce shoved him so hard that he lost balance and fell from the bed. Not that he was hurt; Lonnie never folded clothes, so his fall was broken. It did not mean that he wasn't completely thrown by the act. "Jesus fuck!" he thundered, springing to his feet.

"Unbelievable, Lonnie! You could have told me this so many times, you goddamn piece of shit!" Joyce was on her feet, pulling on any article of clothing she could find. It was four in the morning, but she was not going to spend another minute in Lonnie's shithole apartment.

"Joyce... Joyce, don't leave. It's dark outside – would you stop for two seconds? – Joyce, kid –" Lonnie shoved Joyce away from the front door and slammed it shut. "Just stay for a few more hours. I'll sleep on the floor." He cried out in pain and reeled back a few steps as she struck him in the face with an open palm, dragging her nails against his cheek.

"Don't touch me again!" she roared, throwing the door open. Lonnie rushed to push it shut once more. Joyce pushed one hand against his chest as she struggled to keep it open, wedging herself between it and the frame in order to begin her escape.

Lonnie, not wanting to crush her, threw the door open and moved in

front of her.

"Come on, Joyce. The neighbors are going to hear, and I'm practically naked. This is going to be embarrassing for both of us."

Joyce leaned forward with burning eyes and intoned: "Then. Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. My. Way." Bluff called, Lonnie relented and moved to one side to allow a fuming Joyce to brush past him. "And don't ever come back to this town, you rat bastard!" Joyce could not help but scream at the top of her lungs when she made it down the stairs.

The sun was beginning to peek out over the horizon when Joyce made it to Grandpa Jonathan's house. The spare key was not under the welcome mat, so she sat in the porch swing and watched the sun rise. She had no plan. She had no home. She was absolutely bristling with angry energy over the fact that the plan she *did* have had fallen through so spectacularly. Stupid Lonnie. She never held any delusions about his inability to be a good person, but this stunt took the cake. She hoped he died in an earthquake.

"Joyce?" A gruff voice pulled her out of her reverie. She turned her head towards the voice and spotted Jim Hopper, staring at her from behind the picket fence.

"Hey."

"Are you okay?"

Joyce shook her head and shrugged. "I mean, not really, Hop."

"Do you want to come in and have breakfast? Mom is making French toast."

Joyce stared at her hands for a few moments and then heaved an exhausted sigh. "Can I sleep in the guest room for a few hours? I didn't really get any sleep."

"Of course."

And so Joyce was taken back, without question, into the Hopper family's home. Sarah's bedspread was the same as it had been the first

night Joyce had been brought into the family – pale pink and exploding with frills. She slept heavily as the rest of the family went off to church and did not wake up until the noonday sun was high in the sky. Mimi gave her a ginger ale, a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup when she padded dejectedly down the stairs.

"You don't have to talk about it, sweetheart, but if you do want to, we are not here to judge you," Mimi cooed, kissing the top of Joyce's head when the younger girl broke down in between bites of her sandwich.

Joyce explained the events of the weekend to Jim, as they sat around the fire pit in the backyard.

"I'll kill him," Jim growled, as he started to get to his feet.

"Sit down. No, you won't."

"He's got a lot of goddamn nerve, that stupid motherfucker!"

Carl Hopper shouted: "Watch that language, son!" from an open upstairs window.

"Watch that language, James," Joyce teased with a little smile, as Jim sat next to Joyce, face red from rage and from embarrassment at being scolded.

"I just wish I could snap his neck. Are you...are you hurt bad?"

Joyce furrowed her brow and slowly shook her head. "I guess not...it doesn't feel great, Hop. I guess I'm more disappointed. I thought I had everything figured out to the last detail, and now I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Stay here."

"No, Ji–"

"Stay here until you figure out your next move. The house is going to get put on the market next week, and there's going to be an auction. Take a few weeks to process is all I'm saying. Take what you want from the house, make plans, but just stay here. Not because I want to

take care of you –"

"You do."

"Yes, I do, I guess – is that so terrible? – forget it. Stay here because you need a roof over your head."

Joyce drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, staring into the fire. "Fine," she whispered.

"And go to prom with me."

"What? N-no...are you –"

"Treat yourself to a night of normalcy, for Christ's sake."

"I was just dumped...and it's in three weeks! I might not even be here in three weeks. I could be anywhere – New York or Charlotte or –"

"So now you're planning on running away?"

Joyce shrugged, throwing her hands in the air. "Maybe? I don't know."

"With what money? Jesus Christ, Joyce, you're just a ki-"

"Don't *ever* call me a kid."

"Would you rather I call you 'Louisa'? Because that's who you're reminding me of with all this running away talk."

"Not. Fair."

Joyce flinched when Jim threw an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, but settled against his side when she realized how tired she was from all the fighting. Her day had been nothing but, and she did not know how much she had left in her – plus, he was warm, solid, dependable and comforting. "I'm sorry, Joyce. That was low." He buried his face against her long, mussed-up hair and sighed, before resting his chin on the top of her head. Joyce moved to take one of his large, elegant fingered hands between her small and cold ones, bringing it to rest on her lap. He shuddered at the contact, but

then allowed her to draw heat from him.

"It was."

"Can you pause on the running away talk until after prom? I didn't ask because I'm trying to swoop in to fill a vacancy now that shithead is gone, by the way."

Joyce eyed him suspiciously. Their intimate stance suggested that Jim's motives weren't entirely pure, but the idea of a night of dancing and forgetting seemed too good to pass up. "Yeah, I guess so." She felt his arm tighten around her, and despite the fact that she had woken up that morning in the bed of another man – one that she thought she was going to live with – Joyce felt an intense rush of heat come over her in waves.

"He'll regret doing this to you, Joyce."

Joyce snorted. "Lonnie? Fat chance."

Jim chuckled. "He will though. He'll be walking along the streets of some hippie-dippy California town –"

"Probably *my* San Francisco."

"Probably *your* San Francisco – and some stupid little club will be playing that old Sinatra song, and it will make him cry like a baby because he had the greatest girl on the planet and he fucked it all up."

"You're going to have to be more specific on that Sinatra song," Joyce teased. Jim always got flustered when she even hinted at him singing. She caught him doing it once; she happened upon him cleaning the rain gutters and crooning to "Luck be a Lady." He had nearly fallen from the ladder when she clapped uproariously at the performance. Jim Hopper, secret Sinatra fan.

"That one about Ava Gardner where he's all:

*In the wee small hours of the morning*

*While the whole wide world is fast asleep*

*You lie awake and think about the girl*

*And never, ever think of counting sheep...*

Jim was blushing like a fine wine by the time he was done singing. Joyce thought that he wasn't terrible. His voice quavered from the mortification of being put on the spot, and he was practically whispering, but his singing voice was rich and deep. Joyce lifted her head and pressed a kiss on his smooth jawline – his skin burned to the touch.

"You've had a really long day, Joyce. Let's go to bed before Mom sees and starts sending out wedding invitations." Joyce's eyes widened on 'let's go to bed', her face blazing hot at the implication. "I mean...you know I meant you go to Sarah's room and I'll go to mine." He stood so suddenly that Joyce nearly toppled to one side. She righted herself and nodded.

"Of course. Even if we were going to...we're not – but even if we were, I don't think you'd be stupid enough to take me on your twin bed, with your parents sleeping down the hall from you." Jim's face immediately took on a sheepish look, his eyes darting to look anywhere but Joyce's face. "Oh, you dummy. You didn't really sneak girls into your room, did you?"

Jim shrugged. "Needs must."

Joyce groaned, shook her head, and stood, wiping the grass and earth from the back of her legs. "Men are disgusting."

"You're the one thinking about shaking up my twin bed twelve hours after a breakup."

"Ugh! I'm telling your mother." Joyce started for the back door, putting exaggerated speed into her steps. Jim – long-legged and athletic – caught up to her in a thrice, grabbed her about the waist, lifted her from the ground, and turned her about so that she faced the opposite direction. He ran for the door and slammed it shut before she could reach it, playing at locking her out before letting her inside.



Joyce punched him in the arm, playfully, and was about to do so again, but Jim caught her by the wrist, pulled her close and bent low to capture her lips in a searing kiss. She tensed, and then relaxed, bringing her arms up and around his neck, and straining on her tip-toes in an attempt to deepen their connection. He placed his hands on her waist and guided her to the ancient brown couch in the mudroom. She fell back when she felt it bump against the back of her knees and he followed, putting his weight on his elbows rather than her.

Joyce whimpered against Jim's mouth as his kisses increased in urgency and then gasped when his hips ground against hers. Her eyes snapped open, and she pushed against his chest.

"No..." she murmured against his mouth. He was off of her in an instant, sitting at the far edge of the couch, panting and covering his mouth with a trembling hand.

"That shouldn't have happened," he groaned. "Jesus Christ, Joyce. I'm so sorry."

Joyce pulled herself into a sitting position and placed a hand over her chest. Her heart was beating a rapid pattern, swift as a hummingbird's wings. "I don't..."

"It's not appropriate. Lonnie just –"

"I know what Lonnie just did. I had front row seats."

"And you're staying here. In my sister's room. In my parent's house."

"All true."

Jim took a long, deep, shuddering breath. "I'm not going to lie. I've wanted to do that to you for a really, *really* long time."

Joyce looked over to him and bit her lip. "You could have said, instead of acting like a caveman Lothario the entire time I dated him."

Jim glared at her. "Like the night you kissed me and then told me to go fuck other girls, and gave me a list?"

Joyce stood, hands balled into fists, expression matching Jim's in annoyed disgust. "I'm going to bed because I don't want to talk about this. I just got dumped, my grandpa is in the hospital, and my mom..." Her voice grew thick with emotion.

Jim winced. She was going to have the upper hand for years with that sort of ammunition. "We can forget this happened."

"Yes."

"For now."

Joyce groaned and headed up the backstairs.

True to his word, Jim did not bring up his and Joyce's interlude the next day. Or the day after that. He and Joyce walked together to school, surprising Benny who thought that the two would never bury the hatchet. The three of them sat together at lunch, all a respectable distance away from one another on the lunch table.

Joyce felt Jim's eyes on her at odd, unguarded moments, but she trained herself to not look back. If she looked back that would mean another completely inconvenient moment was bound to occur. She wanted it, wanted him, but not now. Not when she wasn't sure if that need was fueled by loneliness or remnants of a whim that had struck two years prior. She owed it to him to be sure – owed it to herself.

The weekend rolled around again, and Carl informed Joyce that it was time for her to take what she wanted from her Grandpa Jonathan's home. There would be an estate sale, and then the house would become available for prospective buyers.

Joyce spent Saturday afternoon packing up her room and cleaning out the attic, with Jim, Carl, and Mimi's help. Ultimately, she decided to take her personal belongings, the photo albums, Jonathan's library, a few large prints of his war photography, and several cameras from his collection.

Mimi urged Joyce to look around the kitchen before they left, reasoning that Joyce might want some gadgets, plates, and flatware for when she graduated and went off on her own. Joyce shrugged and

allowed Mimi to lecture her on what was valuable, what was junk, and how to take care of the valuables.

Mimi was about five minutes into a lecture on the uses of a Sunbeam Standing Mixer when Louisa walked into the kitchen, alone. She looked small, and utterly terrified.

"I left Niall," she announced before collapsing in tears. Mimi ran to the younger woman's aid.

All Joyce could do was stand and stare. She felt Jim lace his fingers between her own and squeeze – a small comfort against this new and potentially disastrous development in her strange young life.

## 10. Chapter 10

Absalom, Indiana

1966

Louisa

Louisa Hansard did not know where her husband was. This was extremely unusual considering that Niall had always been a firm believer that a husband and wife were of one flesh. He was constantly at Louisa's side, lurking behind her, reading over her shoulder, picking out her book list, picking out her outfits, mapping out her day, forbidding her from using the phone.

He disappeared the day Violetta Hughes stopped coming to church. Violetta was the last one standing, if one did not count Matthew and Gloria - and Louisa did not count them, not at all. The teen had performed a miracle the service before, when she had forced the remaining congregants and Niall to run ten laps around the entire perimeter of the church property through mind control.

Niall stood at the pulpit that Sunday, slowly taking in his congregation of three. Louisa sat in the front, while Matthew and Gloria sat towards the middle, golden blonde and grinning serenely (smugly, Louisa thought). Louisa knew he had not slept the night before or the night before that. They were averaging a loss of one congregant every two weeks since...

Louisa, Matthew and Gloria waited expectantly for Niall to speak, or at least Louisa did. Matthew and Gloria gave an impressive imitation of wanting to hang on her husband's every word, their cornflower blue eyes shining with admiration and the ghost of happy tears.

Niall did not speak for a long while. He stared wildly with dark, bloodshot eyes for the first ten minutes of the sermon, taking in deep breaths through his nose that flared his nostrils and rattled his chest. His suit was rumpled, and his hair was a wind-tossed mess. Louisa noticed him reflexively grasping and crumpling a small stack of papers on the podium. At last, he opened his mouth and released a

hoarse breath, followed by a bizarre keening noise. Louisa stood, ready to assist her husband, despite her reservations and suspicions about his recent behavior. "Sit down, Louisa!" Niall barked when he took note of Louisa's action.

"Niall, are you alright?" Louisa asked, a sob rising up in her throat.

Niall raised a silencing hand and shook his head. "I'm... I'm dreadfully sorry, my friends. You were all expecting a sermon - something to comfort you as these days become increasingly more confusing. Why are our friends leaving us, one-by-one? Why do we remain? Why can't I ... we feel the presence of our lord any longer? What can I-I... w-what can we do in times like this?" Tears began to fall from Niall's eyes. "He says to bring the girl, bring the girl and we can all be together, but my wife is weak and cannot bring me what we need. So what are we to do? Sh-shall I go out into the wilderness without a dime to my name or a morsel in my pocket and wait? I am undone... I..." Niall's gaze fixed on the stained glass windows, on Louisa's design. His eyes became glassy and his mouth kept opening and closing in a gentle motion, like a fish or a whispering child. Louisa noticed that Matthew and Gloria were furiously scribbling in their little notepads. They weren't even trying to be sneaky about it.

"Stop it!" Louisa shouted at the pair. They looked up from their notepads and graced her with another pair of sickeningly sweet smiles. So sympathetic and patronizing. Louisa was so done with this. Once again, she started to get to her feet and make her way for the aisle. Niall nearly knocked her over as he ran past her, towards the exit. He threw open the double doors and was gone.

"D'you suppose he's coming back?" Matthew inquired, getting to his feet, a wry grin fixed on his absurdly handsome face.

"Oh, who gives a fuck?" Louisa intoned, meaning it. She hoped he never came back, and she definitely hoped he wasn't going to hide away in her home. The home she could have with...

It was time to leave.

Hawkins, Indiana

## Two Days Later

Jim

"So, you're going back with her?" Jim Hopper sat on the edge of his sister's bed as Joyce Fairley packed a suitcase. The brunette shrugged, sat next to Jim and pushed errant strands of hair away from her face. "You don't have to, Joyce."

Joyce bit her lip and looked as though she were considering his words. "I think I do."

Jim felt as though he would never understand Joyce in a million years, but the determined look in her deep brown eyes told him that she honestly believed in what she was saying. He made one more move to dissuade her: "She was terrible to you, Joyce. She doesn't deserve you, and you don't need to prove anything by staying with her."

Joyce shook her head. "Something feels different this time, and maybe I'm wrong - again - but if this was your mother we were talking about, could you stay away? Honestly turn your back on your mother?"

"My mother-"

"-is a saint, Jim. That's why you can't even fathom what this feels like. I really, really tried to let her rot - tried to ignore her. Every single time I had a terrible thought, or wished she was dead, or told her as much, felt like I was stabbing myself in the gut because I thought I would be stronger for it." Jim pulled her against his side when he noticed the tears making an appearance in the corners of her eyes. "It just hurt. Maybe it will stop hurting for a little while if I try again." He held her as she wept and felt absolutely terrible for questioning her reasoning. Of fucking course he'd feel terrible if their roles were reversed and his mother was the... whatever Louisa was at this point, he wasn't sure. He hoped against hope that it was something good.

Jim laid back in the bed, taking Joyce with him as her weeping began to die down. "I suppose it helps that her creep husband isn't

around."

Joyce sniffled and rested her head against Jim's chest. "Oh, absolutely."

"If this turns out wrong - if she hurts you again, come straight here."

Joyce laughed. "Do you ever get tired of trying to be my white knight?"

"I'm being serious."

Joyce kissed his cheek. "I know you are, Hop. If it goes wrong, I will come straight here. I'll crawl through your bedroom window and climb into your bed and-"

"I like where this is going."

Joyce nudged him in his side. "I wasn't finished, perv - I'll lean over and whisper, 'You were right, Hop,' into your ear."

"And it will be the sexiest thing anyone has ever said to me." Jim reached over and took one of Joyce's hands in his, stroking his forefinger along the fine bones of her knuckles.

They were silent for a long while, and the rhythmic sound of her breathing nearly put him to sleep. A knock on the door gave them both a start. They scrambled to sit up as Louisa stepped into the room. The older woman immediately looked apologetic and fixed her gaze to the floor. "Joyce, I'm so sorry, sweetheart, I was just checking to see if you were about ready to go back ho- ... go back."

Joyce nodded and stood. Jim followed suit and walked over to a mortified Louisa. "Ma'am, I just wanted to let you know that it wasn't what you think."

Louisa just laughed nervously and waved a hand at the young man. "Good lord, I was a teenager once. You're both making better choices than I was at that age, so who am I to judge?" She gave Jim a stern look and a chiding finger wave. "I won't tell your parents. Thank your lucky stars I walked in and not them." Louisa helped Joyce pick up a few bags, smiling to herself and shaking her head as she did.

"Yes, Ma'am. See you around, Joyce." Jim's heart skipped a beat when Joyce looked up at him and graced him with a shy smile, her intense brown eyes twinkling.

"See you at school," Joyce replied.

"Let me know if you need me to take you into the city to shop for a prom dress," Jim added, unable to stop himself from reminding her of her promise.

Joyce blushed deeply in response. Louisa looked intrigued. "I think we can manage, son," the older woman responded as she led her daughter from the room.

Despite his reservations about what was happening in Joyce's life, Jim found himself flooded with optimism and grinning like an idiot. They didn't hate each other anymore, Lonnie was long gone, and she was going to prom with him. He sat back on the bed and touched the rumpled spot where the two of them had been lying moments earlier. There was still a ghost of warmth clinging to the eider down quilt.. The world was suddenly bursting with possibilities. They would go to prom, he would ask her to go steady, and that would be that.

Jim's brain busily worked at the meaning of 'that would be that,' seeing college and marriage flash before his eyes - a concept that frankly would have terrified him with any other girl, but with Joyce it made sense. It was as though the universe had set these events in motion the day she got off the plane from San Francisco, all frightened and owl-eyed and eager for his friendship. They were merely fulfilling destiny, she and him.

It was awful and weird that their destiny had to involve Jonathan getting so badly hurt, and that tidbit made Jim feel terrible and selfish for the optimism he had let slip into his outlook. It wasn't right or fair, planning his future with Joyce while her grandfather shriveled away on a hospital bed, his once fine mind seemingly gone. Jim frowned as the spot on the bed grew cold. He wondered if it was okay to be ecstatic over the fact that he had a shot with Joyce and still recognize that the goings on in her life were tragic and deserving of some measure of gravity.



## Three Weeks Later

Joyce

Joyce stared across the little round cafe table at her mother, studying her, as the older woman sipped at a large cup of coffee. The two of them were in a coffee house several blocks away from the Indianapolis rehabilitation center where Jonathan Fairley was recuperating. The visit had been miserable. He still was not speaking or even acknowledging Louisa and Joyce, even though he was conscious and somewhat mobile. Joyce had been distraught at the lack of improvement in her beloved grandfather, and Louisa had been... hard to read. She had observed it all so stoically, staying silent as Joyce tried time and time again to get Jonathan's attention. Joyce wasn't sure if the woman was heartless or tired.

"Stop staring, Joyce. You're making me uncomfortable."

"Do you care about Grandpa?"

Louisa nearly choked on her coffee. She set down the cup and frowned at Joyce. "What kind of question is that?"

"You didn't say anything to him."

"He didn't say much of anything to either of us." Louisa raised a hand when Joyce opened her mouth the protest the callous reply. "Baby, I don't know what to tell you. There has been... a lot has happened since the last time I saw your grandfather. A lifetime of things - and I apologize if it looks like I'm being cruel but I-I... guess I don't know how to react to things anymore. I feel hollow inside. On the outside, I know that what is happening to my father is horrific and that I should feel guilty and grief-stricken but... the awareness of the situation isn't..." Louisa paused and took several deep breaths, studying her hands as though they held the key to what she was trying to say. "It's like I'm watching these things from outside of my body, like a movie I know I should be invested in, but I'm not. ... does that make sense?"

"I've felt like that a few times," Joyce confessed. "Sometimes, when things get to be too much, and they've gotten to be too much a lot

lately, something in me says 'that's enough for today' and I kind of -"

"Check out?"

Joyce nodded and gave her mother a weak smile, grateful that someone finally understood. "Yes."

Louisa stood and held out a hand to Joyce. "You have prom tomorrow, and we haven't picked out that dress for you yet."

Joyce took her mother's hand; it was warm and small, and for the first time in a long time, it felt like home.

"Look at you, baby."

Joyce was looking. Preening really. There may have been a bit of twirling involved as well as she studied her reflection in the full length mirror. Her mother was beaming at her from the edge of the bed, holding a pair of elbow-length white gloves in her nervous hands. Joyce held out her hands for the gloves, and Louisa obliged, covering her mouth to suppress a tiny sob.

"I think we picked the right dress," Joyce murmured, hesitant to verbalize how becoming she thought she was in that moment. The dress itself was secondhand, bought from a consignment boutique in downtown Indy - the form-fitting mermaid cut was not what was considered 'vogue' at the moment, but such a detail was meaningless to Joyce in light of how she felt, encased in the midnight blue satin. It was somewhat low-cut, and combined with the thin straps, her arms, shoulders, collarbone, and most of her back were exposed.

"Let me fix your hair, you've got a few flyaways." Louisa stood and ran a shaping hand over Joyce's pile of artfully arranged curls. "You've got such a lovely neck. I'm glad we went with an updo." She pinched at Joyce's cheeks to bring out color, which made Joyce's cringe.

"I have rouge."

Louisa clucked her tongue at Joyce. "You are hopeless at makeup. That junk is too dark for your skin." She pulled a few strands of hair out of Joyce's updo, so that the young brunette had a whisper of curls

to frame her face. Louisa finished fussing in time for the doorbell to ring and for Joyce's heart to lodge in her throat. "I guess I didn't have to pinch after all. You've always had a first class blush, baby." Louisa teased, turning to leave the bathroom and answer the door.

Joyce spent a long moment standing in one place, staring at the empty space where her mother had stood. The anticipation she was feeling for one night of normalcy spread from the tips of her toes to the top of her scalp like a wildfire. She was going to a dance, like a normal teenager with a normal life. The little thrill of getting to sway so close to Jim was pleasant, but the promise of being able to do what everyone else was doing was downright intoxicating. She grabbed her white, rabbit fur wrapper, her purse, and headed towards the living room.

Jim was making small talk with Louisa by the front door when Joyce entered the living room. Louisa gave her daughter a gentle smile, and Jim looked at her with the wide, astonished eyes of someone who just received terrible news (or at least, that's how Joyce thought it looked). His face went pale, and he took an exaggerated gulp of air. Despite his ridiculous expression, Joyce thought he looked tall and dashing in his black tuxedo.

"That bad, huh?" Joyce teased. She made a move to cover her shoulders with the wrap, but Jim closed the distance between the two of them and plucked the garment from her hands. "Hey!"

"Here," he mumbled, holding up a white orchid corsage. His glanced down at the bodice of her dress and Joyce heard his breath catch in his throat. "I h-have to pin it on you," he stammered. Joyce chuckled and guided his hands a spot high on the bust, near one of the straps, and pulled at the fabric so that he could pin the corsage without puncturing her skin. His breath came out hot against her skin and made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. When he pulled away, they were both blushing fiercely.

"Let me take a picture before you both run off into the night," Louisa announced, running to the kitchen where Grandpa Jonathan's cameras lined the mantle of the fireplace. She came back with the last camera he purchased before the accident, a little black Pentax. "Joyce, put the wrap down and pose nice with your boyfriend."

Joyce ignored the label levied at her by her mother and posed next to Jim for the mandatory prom photographs. She felt his fingers stroking idly at the small of her back and wondered how he could keep such calm composure, when she felt as though she might ignite from his touch.

"I think I have all I need. You two have fun and be safe tonight!" Louisa announced, moving to the door to open it for Joyce and Jim. "I'm not going to give a curfew, but I would like her back before dawn, James."

"Yes, Ma'am," Jim mumbled as he placed the wrap around Joyce's shoulders. Joyce shivered when he pressed a kiss on the back of her neck while Louisa was distracted by something on the porch. She allowed him to be chivalrous, smiling as he opened the passenger side door to his Oldsmobile for her. "You look so goddamn beautiful tonight," he complimented once they were both inside the vehicle.

"You combed your hair," Joyce replied, bringing her hand up to push an errant strand of dark blonde hair from his forehead. He caught her gently by the wrist and pressed a kiss at her pulse point, which made her giggle spontaneously (and idiotically, she thought). "Stop that, she'll be able to see from the window."

"So?"

"So, I don't want her to get an eyeful. She almost caught us last night."

"You really need to clean out underneath your bed. I can't believe how cluttered it is."

Joyce rolled her eyes. "I don't need a lecture from the boy who's been sneaking in through my bedroom window at night."

"It was perfectly innocent."

"Because we almost got caught before it wasn't."

Jim gave Joyce a wolfish grin and leaned over to kiss her cheek before starting the car. Her stance on giving herself time to mourn Lonnie had ended a week prior, when she realized that she had

nothing to mourn, and that Jim looked really, really nice in that white t-shirt and jeans he wore the day he had to fix his car. Those realizations occurred almost simultaneously, and Joyce had surprised her old friend with a kiss when he emerged from beneath his car to take a socket wrench from her.

Well, that won't fix my car, but I can't say it's unwelcome.

Let's give this a try, Hop. I mean, why the hell not?

Jim's response was to grab Joyce around the waist and maneuver her so that her back was pressed against the roller-thing, and he was upon her, peppering her face with kisses and staining her chambray shirt with oily hand prints.

So that was that. They had not wasted any time getting further acquainted either. Joyce had found, through her experience with Lonnie, that sex was fun. One of the things that had left her distraught about getting dumped by the asshole, was the fact that she would not be having it anymore. Naturally, when she decided to make things work with Jim, she made it clear to him that they needn't wait to enjoy certain things. He had no objections, being a hot-blooded seventeen-year-old coming off of a considerably lengthy (for him) dry spell.

The prom was held at the local VFW, and the normally bland hall was festooned with silver, blue and white balloons, streamers and ribbons. Joyce gawked at the decorations, and the boys from the school gawked at her, which made Jim a little testy. "I like this place better when they have Fish Frys," he grumbled, shooting a death stare at Fred Berger, who was taking a little too much time to drink in Joyce's figure as she shrugged off her wrap.

"I think it's beautiful. Lonnie never took me to dances. He said they were for children."

"Maybe he should have stopped dating teenagers, if that's the way he felt." Jim led her to the dance floor, just as a slow song started to play. Joyce was not much of a dancer and neither was Jim, but they swayed together with a natural ease, and she liked having an excuse to be held close to his strong, youthful frame. "I think I'm the envy of

every single guy here tonight," he gloated.

"Shut up, you sap."

"It's true. All these other dresses look like tents." He hissed when she stepped on his foot.

"I don't know why they're envying you, I'm the one who put in all the work of eating cheeseburgers and malts during my shifts at Benny's to create this figure."

"Yeah, but I'm the one who gets to enjoy it at the end of the day - don't pinch me, Joyce!" Jim jumped to one side to dodge Joyce's twisting fingers. She hugged him tight in response and tilted her head to receive a kiss for her efforts. He obliged, and they stood in the middle of the floor for a long while, engaging in urgent and slightly risqué kisses.

And that is how Jim and Joyce got ejected from prom. Joyce's 'far too low-cut' gown was also cited as a reason, which prompted Jim to call the principal a 'dried up old prude' who should probably stop leering at Joyce just because he couldn't get any at home. Jim was then told not to show up for school on Monday or Tuesday. Joyce's exasperated 'oh, for fuck's sake' bought her a long weekend as well.

After their early departure from prom, Jim drove Joyce to the lake, to his family's getaway trailer. The second home had been Carl's retirement present to himself, more a refuge for the older man to collect his thoughts and be one with nature than a vacation house for the entire clan. It was small and had a shabby masculinity that suited the elder Hopper. Mimi had little use for it, especially when her offers to decorate had been rejected. Jim had found many uses for it in the past few years, albeit through stealing the key from his father's office.

"Remember, home by dawn," Joyce reminded Jim between kisses, as he fumbled with the long row of buttons on the back of her dress in front of the bed in the guest room. "You - mmmm - you can't do that with one hand, dummy, it's not a zipper."

Dawn was breaking over the horizon when Jim drove Joyce back

home. Her hair was mussed and springing from her bobby pinned coif, and her eyes were smeared with mascara. They both had satisfied grins on their faces.

"We're both in for it," Joyce remarked.

"Yep."

"Also, we have to start being more careful about other things."

Jim blushed and nodded. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that."

Joyce shrugged. "No use crying over spilled milk, I guess."

"I guess. It would be nice to have a little get-out-of-Nam free card of our own though, wouldn't it?" He was joking, and Joyce knew he was joking, but she felt a little twist in her gut at the implication.

"Haha."

Jim reached over and covered the clasped hands in her lap with his large, warm one. "Hey. We'll start being more careful. We don't need that sort of thing at this point in our lives, right? It would be hard to get each other through Indiana State that way, wouldn't it?" He laughed nervously.

"Picking my school for me, Hop?"

"I mean - you can go where you want but I just -"

"Relax. It's my first choice, you idiot. That's where Grandpa is."

Jim gave a relieved sigh at her words and smiled softly. "Well, here we are. Good luck, dead girl walking."

"Same to you."

Jim

Jim Hopper slept until three pm the morning after prom. His parents apparently had not stayed up waiting for him, so he managed to avoid a well-deserved grounding. He found himself whistling through

his weekend routine of showering, brushing his teeth and preparing a meal of toast and bacon. It was a glorious, glorious day. He picked up his mom and gave her a twirl, for god's sake. He hadn't embraced her in years, and she told him as much after he set her down, blushing and perplexed.

"It's just a good day, Mom."

Mimi grinned knowingly. "You had fun at the prom with Joyce."

Jim nodded and then remembered his suspension. "I'm going to go pick her up for a walk and a late lunch. By the way, I don't have to be in school Monday or Tuesday." He walked out the front door before he could see her reaction, but he heard her outraged sputter.

The sun was shining, and it was turning out to be a perfectly warm spring day. Hawkins was finally getting over the freak cold snap and snow storm from a few weeks back. Jim felt as though a blue bird would land on his hand if he stuck it out the window of his car, the day was so gorgeous. A perfect day for a walk with a girl he...

Huh. He had meant to tell Joyce he loved her the night before, really had meant to say so dozens of times, but it was something that always slipped his mind. Surely she knew. She had to. She was planning on going to the same school as him, after all. No matter, he was going to tell her on the walk around the lake.

Jim pulled into Joyce's driveway, frowning as he took note of a sleek black car already parked. He knew that car anywhere...

The door opened after three knocks. Jim was taken aback at the sight of Niall Hansard, finely tailored and smiling his unsettling crocodile smile at Jim. "Can I help you, son?" he inquired in a mild, musical tone.

"I - uh - can I please speak to Joyce?" Jim tried to see beyond Niall's shoulder. The house was dark, but he could make out the figure of Louisa, lying on the couch, fast asleep. Something was not right. Something was...

Niall chuckled softly. "Son, I'm dreadfully sorry to be the one to tell



you this, but Joyce ran off a few hours ago."

Jim's veins suddenly felt like they were shot with ice and electricity. Impossible. "Ran off?"

"That boy - well, that man, really - he came back. What was his name again? Ah, Lonnie. He showed up sometime this morning begging her to come away with him. There was a terrible row between Joyce and her mother -"

"Lonnie?"

"Yes. They're long gone by now. It's such a shame, really."

## 11. Chapter 11

This is officially the last chapter before the epilogues, of which there are two. The first one will be detailing Jim's life from 1966 to current events and the final one will deal with Joyce. It's been a wonderful ride! Thank you so much for all of your support. Be sure to follow me on tumblr at [StarMaamMke](#) of my fic blog [StrangerThingsFics](#) .

Song referred to in this chapter is "La complainte du partisan". I wanted the reference to be "The Partisan" by Leonard Cohen, but the recording is off by a year or so. Both the Anna Marly and the Cohen versions are great. You can listen to them here:

Anna Marly:

[watch?v=uTMe6-6VSuQ](#)

Leonard Cohen:

[watch?v=S34cVkJ6zCE](#)

### Chapter Text

#### Joyce

Joyce was learning a lot. The first was to be wary of who brought the water. If it was her mother, fine. If it was Niall, fine. If it was both of them, it was time to fight. Not that the fighting did much good; if Niall wanted her to drink that water, it was going to happen. She did manage to tear some flesh off his hand while he pried her jaws open once. His fist had her head ringing for a good six hours after that.

When she drank the water, her mother drank the water. At first, it was not water, but a little tab of paper, forcibly pressed against Joyce's tongue to melt like a snowflake. Niall stopped those visits when the risk of losing digits became very real. (He did not have to get so close to Joyce's teeth with water.) Anyway, Joyce drank, her mother drank and they would sit side-by-side, Louisa's clammy hands clutching one of Joyce's and squeezing, while Niall spouted off a

diatribe of scripture. Most of the passages were familiar to Joyce - she and Grandpa Jonathan and the Hoppers were regular churchgoers, and Pastor Charles covered a lot of ground - but sometimes the passages seemed...Joyce couldn't put a name to it. Corrupted? Tweaked? Or maybe she was mishearing. Once the colors began to brighten and blur, and Niall's voice became a weird, distorted echo, Joyce started to doubt the things she saw and heard. She was quizzed regularly after the sessions, (What did you see? Did you feel it?) but she stayed resolute in her silence.

To be honest, she had no idea what she was supposed to feel or see. Mostly she felt lousy. She had tried grass a few times with Lonnie, and that was fine. It didn't make her feel uncomfortable or out of her ever-loving mind like the stuff her stepfather and mother were forcing into her system.

"She's frightened. She's not in the right mind to do this, Niall!" her mother had argued, pushing the wet strands of hair off of Joyce's feverish brow as the younger girl vomited into a Wells Blue Bunny bucket.

"Joyce, you have to listen to my word, love. You have to listen to the word. You are the key to opening the gate and letting us all in. You are the key to your mother's power."

Joyce just shook her head and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She had no idea how to respond when they both went on and on about gates and keys. Niall refused to go into specifics because he didn't want to "influence her mind" when she took the water, and her mother couldn't even look her in the eye, let alone explain herself. On that particular session, Joyce thought she could see her Grandpa Jonathan standing across the room next to an old chalkboard. He was all pale grey, a loving wisp of smoke. His lips were moving, and Joyce had to lean over and squint to make out the words. She smiled when she recognized what he was saying. Joyce saw her mother's eyes widen and Niall's gleam with expectation, as she straightened her spine and folded her hands in her lap, coy smile not leaving her lips. "What did you see?" Niall hissed, grabbing her upper arm with a painful grip. His other hand came up to grab her chin and pull her gaze to his. Despite his ungente hands, Joyce kept smiling.

Once upon a time, Joyce had struggled with mathematics. It had happened quite suddenly around the time that she was expected to have a laundry list of formulas memorized. She had cried and struggled, and Grandpa Jonathan caught her ripping up her homework in the dining room one afternoon, using words he never encouraged, but had accidentally used in front of her once or twice. Rather than take her to task for the outburst, he sat her down and asked for an explanation. She was a failure at math. Her teacher was going too fast and it was useless. She was going to give up, and she hoped he wasn't too terribly disappointed in her over it, but could he please ask her teacher to excuse her from math forever?

As with most things that troubled Joyce, Grandpa Jonathan offered advice in the form of talking about World War II. For some reason, Joyce's particular predicament reminded him of the French Resistance. After a long story rife with danger and death, Grandpa Jonathan went to his record collection and pulled out one by an artist named Anna Marly. He played one song and translated the lyrics along with the music.

It was meant to tell Joyce not to give up, and it did not take Joyce long to realize what the non-corporeal version of him was trying to say.

Les Allemands étaient chez moi

On m'a dit: "Résigne-toi",

Mais je n'ai pas pu.

Et j'ai repris mon arme.

Niall's eyes darkened, and his jaw tensed. Joyce was hazily astonished that he understood what she was saying. He was more intelligent than she thought, and her French wasn't as terrible as Grandpa Jonathan said it was. "You're smart for a religious nutcase," she complimented in a slurring drawl.

"Two days - no food, no water. Let's see how stubborn you are after that." They left her, Niall dragging her mother behind him, detailing all the things he would do to her if he caught the older woman

sneaking food.

If Joyce had to guess, she was being held in an old early childhood Sunday School classroom. The room was large and mockingly cheerful, with poorly rendered Disney characters fading from existence on the pale yellow cinder block walls. Her bed was an old Army cot with a scratchy wool blanket and no pillow, though she preferred to sleep inside of the ancient wooden climber that had clearly existed for the preschool age children of the past. The light was dimmer within the damp walls that reeked of mold.

There were no clocks on the wall, nor were there any windows. Niall kept the room illuminated with fluorescent lights at all times, so Joyce had no idea how long she had been down there, nor did she sleep easy. After what she assumed was two weeks (she started counting meals), she began to get regular migraines from the lights. Not long after that, she was getting sick without the aid of drugs - violently queasy and dizzy for hours on end. She assumed it was because of the new inconsistency with her feeding schedule.

Joyce wished Niall would tire of his endless cycle of preaching and punishment and just kill her, if she was being honest. She had neither an idea of what he wanted, nor the ability to give it to him. As it stood, he had taken just about everything from her. She had no way of knowing how her grandpa was doing, Jim thought she had run away with Lonnie, and her mother...

Joyce had returned from prom, nervous about how late she was, but floating on air over how wonderful the night had turned out. It had been the first time in a while that she thought maybe life wasn't going to continue to kick her in the teeth. Jim was in love with her (she knew, he didn't have to say. He had a terrible poker face), and she had a future. Her mother was well, and free and behaving like a mother, and maybe Grandpa Jonathan would be okay too.

She walked into the house and found her mother slumped on the couch with a rubber tube around her arm, with further evidence of the night strewn on the coffee table. Joyce almost didn't process what she was seeing. It had been years since the needle and the white powder had been a part of her existence, and they seemed so foreign to her in that moment.

"Why-" she had not gotten the chance to finish her interrogative. A sickly sweet, chemical smell assaulted her senses as a cloth was pushed in front of her face from behind, causing the world to go dark. She had woken up in her classroom prison, alone. Niall had shown up after a few hours, and after finally subduing her, he explained exactly why no one would come looking for her.

So funny how life worked. When her mom disappeared, years and years ago, the lies told had been an attempt to salvage her reputation. If Joyce ever got out alive, hers would most certainly be destroyed. It was a good thing Niall was batshit and would probably eventually murder her for not stepping to his vague orders. Maybe she would starve to death, since she couldn't keep food down any more.

Joyce was bent over the bucket one morning (afternoon? night?), bringing up mostly bile, when her mother unlocked the door and entered. She knew it was her mother without even looking. That soft and tentative tread was nothing like Niall's hard and confident stomping. Joyce turned her head and saw the woman wasn't bearing any supplies.

"Joyce-"

"Be careful, he might catch you down here," Joyce warned, digging in the pocket of her flannel nightgown for a handkerchief to wipe her mouth.

Louisa walked over to the climber where Joyce sat and pulled a canteen out of the pocket of her apron, handing it to Joyce. She took it, gargled the water, and spit it back out. "You've been sick, and I'm trying to tell him that, but he won't do anything until you cooperate so he can open the gate. It's been almost two months, you have to give in soon."

"What. Gate?" Joyce's head began to hurt again, and she winced and shielded her eyes with her hands. Two months? Fuck.

"Just listen when he does his sermons. Try to feel the words. I know you will know what he's talking about." Louisa tried to help Joyce to her feet, but the younger woman jerked out of her grasp, going limp on the floor in case there would be a second attempt at assistance. "I

am so sorry." Louisa lowered her voice. "He scares me, Joyce. I don't know what to do, but I think if you make a connection, I can tap into whatever is inside me, and it can help us both escape."

Joyce's eyes flew open, and she regarded Louisa with suspicion. Before, she had just assumed that her mother was going along with Niall's lunacy out of fear. It had not occurred to her that it was something she actually believed in. Not anymore. Not from the vague descriptions her mother had given her about life in Niall's church before he had come barreling back into their lives. To hear Louisa talk about powers and connections in the same rapturous tone as him - it was too much. Joyce looked directly into Louisa's eyes, picked up the canteen, and dumped out its contents. "You are both going to have blood on your hands," she intoned, hurling the canteen towards the nearest wall with all of her strength. It fell short, and the act winded her.

"You have to eat and drink, Joyce."

Joyce hugged her knees to her chest and put her head down in response. Enough was enough, she was checking out. Mercifully, Louisa only stood crying Joyce's name for a short while before leaving in a tearful hurry. When she was gone, Joyce crawled back into the climber, rested her head, and waited to die. Instead of dying immediately, as was her wish, she fell asleep.

Given Joyce's inability to sleep very heavily, it was understandable that the door blowing clear off of its hinges pulled her out of her stupor almost immediately.

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## **Louisa**

"She is going to starve herself, Niall!" Louisa screamed at her husband as he polished the front pew of the church. Gloria and Matthew weren't even coming to services any more, which meant Louisa was the one and only congregant, but Niall insisted on perfection now that he was home.

He had shown up the night of prom, ragged, wild-eyed and visibly thinner, but he still had the strength to overpower and drug her. It

wasn't supposed to come to that, he had told her; she was just supposed to accept that he had experienced a vision in the woods, like a good wife. Come back, like a good wife. Obtain her child for him, like a good wife. He had wandered in the wilderness like Jesus, and everything became clear. Louisa told him that going so long without food and water would do that to a person, but he only laughed. Laughed and shoved her backwards against the wall without so much as touching her, and then Louisa became a believer once more. Just not one that wanted to do as he asked. Hence the drugs, the incentive.

Louisa did tap into the Other Place as she writhed on the couch in a cold blend of ecstasy and misery. She felt the old comfort wash over her body in waves of warmth. Maybe he had been right. Maybe it was Joyce all along. Maybe they could all be happy. She hovered over the place, her long dark hair dangling in curling vines, the blood rushing to her head. The tips of her fingers brushed the top of God's head, and she found it viscous and covered in tiny ridges. God noticed, and looked up at her, opening up his flowered head and shrieking at her. Louisa was terrified and worshipful.

She had come to shortly after, her eyes opening up blearily as Niall stood at the door and lied to that boy. Louisa felt terrible for James in that moment, but she knew things like childhood romance were meaningless when compared to the bigger picture. What she and Niall were about to do was going to change the world...wasn't it? Louisa wasn't so sure.

If she was being honest, she didn't really understand why or how Joyce was going to open the gate. Why they had to keep her in the basement. Why Niall evaded these questions, and why doubt had begun to line his features. He prepared the church every Sunday. Shrieked out his sermons every Sunday...but the cracks were beginning to show again. Every time they went downstairs to see if they could bring something, anything out in Joyce, he became more and more deflated. Louisa began to fear that her husband was abandoning the idea that Joyce was the key to anything and preparing to do something drastic to hide the fact that the girl had ever been taken downstairs. What was worse, her daughter seemed eager to open her arms to the idea. Something had to be done.



Niall scoffed at Louisa's report. "Interesting. Maybe we should let her. Maybe the key is her death."

His indifference was a sucker punch. Louisa knew that they could not continue in this manner. She felt the rage begin to prickle at the back of her neck. "You are talking about my daughter."

Niall gave a snort, set down the rag, and straightened so that he was looking down his nose at Louisa. "My dear girl, that is news to me. When have you ever been anything but a slave to your own desires?"

It hurt like hell, but it was true. That was the funny thing about the truth. "We're going to let her go. This is over, Niall."

He was in front of her in a thrice, wrapping his hand around her neck - not squeezing, but threatening. His mouth pulled up at each corner, stretching into a ghoulish rictus of a grin. "Love, what are you talking about? I think you know that is impossible at this point."

Louisa refused to be cowed, for once. Her eyes burned into his. "She will not stay here another night. She's sick. We'll take her to the hospital, and then you can run. Don't ever come back here again."

Niall's laughter was a primal, high-pitched howl that rained flecks of spittle onto Louisa's face. He squeezed at her neck in an effort to inflict a reaction, but finding none, he released her and stepped backwards. "My. Girl. What on earth do you think you are going to do?"

The prickling in her neck was traveling down her spine, down, down to her toes and back up again to settle into her fingertips. The sensation intensified and became an electrical current. Something was happening, something was going to -

"Are we late?" Matthew and Gloria. Their presence was the catalyst that turned electricity into an inferno of rage and raw power.

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## Joyce

Joyce numbly regarded the door that was now leaning against the wall opposite from the frame, free from its hinges. There was an

awful lot of white dust floating into the room, evidence of a sudden explosion. Joyce rubbed her eyes as the particles swirled, danced and then lodged into her line of vision as she investigated the exit.

"Hello?" she croaked into the darkness. She was staring at a long hallway, at the end of which was a staircase. Every single door in the hallway had been blown from its hinges, and as Joyce poked her head into room after room, she noticed that anything that had been made from glass had shattered. "Curious," she murmured before doubling over in painful, wracking coughs. The dust was everywhere and completely unavoidable. When she happened upon her reflection in the shard of a mirror still clinging to the wall of a passing classroom, Joyce saw that her hair and face were coated in plaster flakes. "I'm the ghost of Christmas Past," she joked to absolutely no one, cracking a smile at her reflection. The inside of her lips were ghoulishly red against her artificially white pallor. "Hello?" she called again as she started to make her way up the stairs.

The double doors at the top of the stairs burst open before Joyce reached the top, and she gave a start when a group of five dark-suited men came into her view. Some of them were holding guns, which made her heart leap to her throat. Her head was swimming with hunger, as well as the knowledge that she was looking at people who were not her mother or Niall.

"I'm not armed," she murmured, weakly raising her arms.

"They're not going to like this - why didn't Brenner know about the girl?" One of the men asked before getting loudly shushed. Joyce thought she might ask who Brenner was, but before she could, one of the men came down the stairs towards her, holding out a gloved hand.

"Are you alright, Miss?" he inquired. Joyce took his hand and fainted in response.

Joyce woke up to the rhythmic beeping of a heart monitor. She was in a hospital bed and there were tubes in her arms and nose, and she felt overwhelmingly groggy. She turned her head to see a thin, bald man with thin lips and spectacles sitting next to the bed. He was reading from a well-worn copy of *Leaves of Grass*. Joyce cleared her

throat to get his attention and his eyes lit up at the sight of her conscious form.

"Miss Fairley! So nice to see you up and about." The man stood and walked across the room to close the door and lock it. Joyce felt panic rear up within her, and she began to sit up. He was at her side immediately, pressing a soothing palm on top of her head. "Shhh. It's not like that, little one. I simply wanted there to be privacy so we can have a chat." He pulled a walkie talkie out of his coat pocket and spoke: "The girl is awake. Make sure all hospital personnel avoid this area." Joyce could not make out the voice from the other end, but whatever they said seemed to be upsetting to the bald man. "Tell that family that she's not taking visitors today, I don't care how intimidating the old man is."

"Who are you?" Joyce demanded in a raspy, unused voice.

The man smiled pleasantly and made his way back to the chair at her bedside. "I'm a friend, Joyce. I'm hoping you and I can help one another. "

Joyce shrugged. "I have no clue how I could."

The man's smile grew inquisitive. "No? Perhaps you could start with why your mother and stepfather were keeping you in the basement of an old church."

Joyce did not like the way he was studying her face. It was as though he was monitoring every movement of her eyes, every twitch in her mouth, preparing to spot a falsehood. It made her heart race and her palms sweat. "Beats me." When it was clear the reply would not suffice, Joyce began to recount her entire relationship with her mother and Niall Hansard. Her words flowed like water, truth trickling out almost unbidden. She wondered if she had been drugged again. The explanation was satisfactory.

"You poor girl. I cannot say much on this matter, since it is one of National Security, but our people have been monitoring your stepfather for some time. There is reason to believe his church has ties to a terrorist organization. The bomb that went off the day of your rescue only confirmed our suspicions."

Joyce began to feel ill, dread gnawing at her insides. "What about my mother?"

"Alive. Badly injured, but being held. Mr. Hansard unfortunately did not survive."

"Not so unfortunate."

"For us, yes. We had much to learn from him, and your mother is..."

"Unhelpful? Useless? A monster?" Joyce felt her eyes sting with each suggestion she gave.

"Catatonic. We would have hoped for more from you."

Joyce shook her head. "Sorry."

"I want you to know that we are all dreadfully sorry for this oversight and are willing to compensate you for our mistakes."

Joyce frowned. "Why would I take your money?"

"Because silence is expensive in cases like these? Because you have two people to think about now?"

"You can keep my mother."

"I was referring to the baby."

## 12. Chapter 12

Notes:

Thank you so much for sticking with me on this journey! Just one more chapter to go and I can put this monster of a WIP to rest.

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Jim Hopper dealt with the disappointment of Joyce's betrayal as best he could. He finished out the school year at Hawkins High and tried to occupy his time with camping trips, helping his parents around the house, and copious amounts of sex with older women he met in the bars he frequented. Never in Hawkins though. On the outskirts of town, he passed for a young man in his early twenties, especially given his impressive height and the fact that grief was giving him his first shadow of a beard.

Two weeks into summer, one of his father's friends recognized Jim and reported back. He was sent off to his sister's house in Indianapolis, mostly because Carl and Mimi were getting too old to deal with his newfound wildness. The summer turned into fall, and Jim decided to enroll in an Indianapolis high school, after the thought of setting foot in Hawkins again turned his stomach. His mother told him Joyce was back in town, alone, injured and in trouble. Lonnie had apparently knocked her up and kicked her to the curb. Yet he was unmoved. It served her right, he thought. Pettiness coursing through his every vein, he told his sister that if Joyce called, he was not at home. If she sent him a letter, it needed to be sent back. He didn't want to be told of these occurrences either. He never mentioned her on his occasional visits to Jonathan Fairley, not that the man had any idea who she was anyway. The accident had severely impaired the older man's ability to recall basic facts and memories.

Switching schools made sense. His parents were getting too old to worry about his shenanigans, and his brother-in-law was away, serving his country in Vietnam, so Sarah needed all the help she could get. Helping her keep an eye on his nieces and nephew certainly kept him out of trouble, and he dutifully attended school until the October he turned eighteen. After that, he decided to enlist

in the Army, rather than wait to get conscripted. His brother-in-law's influence bought him a relatively safe position overseas, much to Jim's annoyance. The little part of him that still ached for Joyce made him yearn for danger. Something about making her feel sorry if he died, even if he had felt nothing when he heard about her relatively long stay in the hospital.

Jim served his time, shorter than most due to a bullet in the hip. His parents pushed Indiana State University, but he opted for the police academy instead and graduated from the program with flying colors. He heard Lonnie had returned to Hawkins and that Joyce had married him before giving birth to a little boy, also named Jonathan. Jonathan the elder had died while Jim was overseas. It had been quiet and peaceful, according to Carl. Jim supposed that this news would've affected him negatively a lifetime ago, but it wasn't Joyce's love life that made him jolt awake in a cold sweat, sheets tangled painfully around his legs. Her betrayal was nothing to the memories that put fist-sized holes in the wall and made it impossible for his girlfriend, Diane, to spend the night, for fear that he would strangle them after coming out from one of his dreams. His mother insisted that he see a therapist, and after his father died, he listened.

It wasn't necessarily his PTSD or his father's death that drove him to seek help; no, it was the trip he made back to Hawkins to attend the funeral. Diane accompanied him because the two of them were going to announce their engagement during a quiet moment before the service. His mother was quiet, but cheerful despite everything. The older woman greeted Diane warmly, and she had broken down in happy tears when Jim announced the engagement.

Everyone liked Diane, and Jim loved her. She was older than Jim by about seven years and one of Sarah's friends from work. Jim had first met her when he moved to Indianapolis, and the woman had been flattered but annoyed at his immediate flirtatiousness. He thought she was brilliant and beautiful, but nothing had happened between the two of them until after he returned from the war. Jim assumed his new seriousness had impressed her.

The church was packed the day of his father's funeral, but he could have picked Joyce out of a crowd of thousands. She sat near the back with a little boy sitting on her lap and no Lonnie in sight. Her hair

was a little bit longer, her expression a little more grave. He couldn't make out the little boy's features, but he had a mop of sandy blonde hair. Mimi noticed Jim noticing Joyce as the three of them moved to their place in the front pew. She touched her son's arm to get his attention.

"Lonnie ran out on her again, poor girl. That's baby Jonathan. You should see him, he's so handsome. Looks nothing like Lonnie, though." Mimi cleared her throat before Jim could respond and waved her arm towards the family pew, allowing Diane and Jim to sit down before she took her place.

"Who was that, Jim?" Diane asked, picking a piece of lint off of his shoulder.

"Old acquaintance from school," he explained, glaring at his mother when it looked like the woman had something to add.

"She's very pretty." Diane stated it as fact, a simple observation without a hint of inflection that would denote jealousy.

"Not my type," Jim grumbled before Mimi hushed him with a disapproving look.

Joyce was one of the last people to meet with Diane, Jim and Mimi in the receiving line, and Jim finally got a good look at Jonathan. The little boy held tightly to his mother's hand, his face buried against her side as she approached the trio. Joyce's eyes flitted nervously between Jim and Diane, but she smiled warmly at Mimi.

"Mimi, Jim...I'm so sorry for your loss."

Mimi walked forward to give Joyce an embrace and a kiss on the cheek before stooping to be eye level with Jonathan. "Do you have a hug for your Auntie Mimi, Jonathan?"

The boy turned, and Jim felt a pang when he realized that he was staring down at a replica of himself at that age. The same shade of hair, the same surly expression and stubborn chin. His eyes were dark like Joyce's, and there was enough of her in the boy to mark him as her own, but Jim couldn't help but stare. He looked to Diane and

knew she saw it too. There was a quick distortion of her features, a glimmer of shock, but the blonde schooled her face into a neutral expression. "What a beautiful little boy!" Joyce gave a start at the taller woman's voice, and their eyes met for the first time. Jim gulped nervously. "I'm Diane." His fiancée offered his ex-girlfriend a hand, and Joyce took it with a hesitant tremble.

"I'm Joyce. Jim and I grew up together." She mussed up her little boy's hair. "This is Jonathan."

"Such a serious little guy," Diane cooed, grinning at the small child.

"Very," Joyce remarked, and the two of them shared a chuckle. Jim had never felt more uncomfortable in his life.

"Will you be staying for the meal, Joyce?" Mimi inquired.

Joyce shook her head. "I don't think so. I told Benny that I would cover for him so he could attend the meal and the burial. We traded off."

Jim felt a stab of annoyance. Benny and Joyce remained close, even though Benny knew that Joyce had betrayed him. The two of them had worked together to get their respective GEDs. Benny, because his father's sudden death forced him to quit school, and Joyce because... obvious reasons. Benny often defended Joyce back when the hurt was still new, though he never detailed why he thought the girl deserved the benefit of the doubt. Jim often wondered if the two were romantically involved, though Lonnie's return to town erased any suspicion of romance. Deep down he knew that it would have been heartless of Benny to fire a single mother, but it still irked him that Joyce was employed by his best friend.

"Well, I'd hate to keep you," Jim commented, which earned him twin glares from his mother and Diane.

Jim saw the hurt flash in Joyce's large brown eyes, and her lower lip trembled for a millisecond before she cleared her throat and nodded. "Well, it was nice meeting you Diane." She gave Mimi another hug and offered more condolences before leaving the three of them to receive the last bit of guests.



"I do not care what went on between the two of you, but you will never behave so shamefully to my guests ever again," Mimi hissed in her son's ear before smiling and accepting a hug from Beatrice Fuller.

Somehow, Jim found himself walking into Benny's Burgers later that afternoon. He told Diane and his mother that he needed a drive to clear his head, and they both nodded in approval before going back to entertain guests. The restaurant was empty, save for Joyce who was flitting about the place, cleaning. Jim assumed most of the population of Hawkins were sitting in his mother's parlor, which explained the lack of customers.

"Do you have something to tell me?" he asked, startling her. She had not noticed his presence from her perch at the top of the counter, where she was attempting to get at the cobwebs on the ceiling. She looked at him with wide eyes and took a step forward. Unfortunately, that step placed her right foot on the top of a creamer bowl, and her body jerked forward when she lost her footing. Jim ran to her with inhuman speed, catching her before she would have landed face forward onto the linoleum. The impact of her small body caused him to reel backwards slightly as her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs around his waist. They stayed like that for an eternity of a moment, her breath hot against his neck, and his hands reacquainting themselves with the expanse of her back. He practically shoved her off of him when he remembered that she was married to Lonnie.

"What do you want, Jim?" Joyce asked, wiping invisible dust off of her clothes.

"Little Jonathan is an interesting-looking kid. Do you have something to tell me?"

"No. Get out."

"This is a public restaurant."

"Consider it closed."

"Is that the reason Lonnie left again?"

Joyce crossed her arms over her chest. Her stance was rigid, and her

eyes were burning. "Lonnie left again because he's a pig. I don't know what else you're implying."

Jim, undeterred by the tempest implicit in her posture, stepped forward and then back when she gave the tiniest flinch - a telling chink in her diamond-hard armor. "I think you do."

"I think you'd better go back to your pretty girlfriend and not complicate things further with blind assumptions. I think she'd prefer to give you her own kids instead of collecting ones you think you already have. Get. Out."

"Just tell me the truth."

"He's. Not. Yours."

Jim allowed himself to believe it, even though her voice cracked when she informed him. Joyce was right, things were going well with Diane, and pursuing certain suspicions would be disastrous for the both of them. Joyce was already marked for getting pregnant at sixteen, and Jim doggedly pressing his claim on the boy would only add fuel to the town gossip fire. Besides, these were only suspicions. He left it alone, though the thought of it, the idea that all was not as it seemed in regards to Joyce's abandonment of him...

So he decided to start therapy. He never talked about Joyce, he had emotional fodder enough without have to go into those complicated details, and it helped, it really did. There were long stretches of time where Joyce did not even enter his mind at all. A few years later, Sarah was born. Jim and Diane named her after the woman who introduced them to one another, and life was finally perfect. The job wasn't perfect, but no one expected police work in Indianapolis to be a cake-walk, and Jim retained his therapist.

He ran into Joyce again when Mimi passed away. This time there was another little boy greeting Jim and Diane at the receiving line. While this child looked nothing like Lonnie, it was very clear he was one hundred percent Joyce's boy. He had the same large, owlish eyes, the same sweet open face, the same will-o-the-wisp frame. Sarah was an entire head taller than him, even though he was older than her by about two months. William. A name Joyce picked out simply because

she liked it, not because it belonged to a dead relative. Jim studiously avoided looking Jonathan the Younger in the eyes, though he could feel the heat of his distrustful stare.

Lonnie was gone again. This time for good. Divorce papers and everything.

"Oh! How..." Diane paused to gauge Joyce's expression. "How wonderful. I truly hope this was the right decision for you," she finished kindly.

Joyce smiled and nodded. "I think it is," she replied shyly before she bid them farewell. Diane and Joyce shared a collective sigh when their respective toddlers embraced one another. Will was pink-cheeked from the kiss Sarah pressed against his cheek, and Jim tried to give his child a disapproving glare, but she was so sweet and beautiful that the reproach died on his features, and he smirked instead.

A few years later, Sarah rotted in the ground, and Jim's marriage imploded. Diane forgave the beard, the moroseness, the drinking, the smoking, and the pills, but she could not forgive him disappearing for a week to get a vasectomy. She had never wanted Sarah to be an only child, and the biological need for another reached its apex two months after the funeral. For Jim, another child, another heartbreak was out of the question. The marriage was the collateral damage of his resolve, and his will was done.

After showing up to work drunk one times too many, roughing up one perp too many, he was fired from his department in the city, which was fine by him. He had tried to blow the whistle on far worse within the department, and he figured he was far too tired to fight the good fight anymore. His own vulnerability and mistakes gave him an out. His therapist would have theorized that it was because he was tired of being confronted with death.

The Hawkins Police Department hired him without question, but with a few raised eyebrows. His father's sterling legacy ensured his employment, but few understood why, after flying so high in the ranks at Indianapolis, an impressive figure like Jim Hopper would even want to bother with their one horse town. His slovenly habits,

tardiness and alcoholism took the prestige off of the department's hire in record time, but no one felt right about getting rid of Carl's boy.

Joyce was working at the General Store now, he noticed. Jim began to suspect that she lived there, considering the fact that he always seemed to end up in her check-out lane. Her hair was short and not cut with any particular skill. She seemed perpetually tired, and the light in her once luminous eyes seemed to have dimmed. These factors did little to distract from the fact that she was still beautiful in her tiny, elven way. They made small talk, and he gleaned that Lonnie had moved to Indianapolis and was a non-person in her sons' lives. However, the temptation to rekindle a long dead flame never crossed his mind. His *modus operandi* was drunken, random, and bereft of feelings. He couldn't imagine approaching Joyce and proposing that they carry on in that manner, no matter how beautiful her lips looked when she smiled her shy smile at him.

Then there was the unspoken reason. High School was a dull ache, but it was a memorable one, and as long as Lonnie drew breath, there would always be that suspicion that he would somehow win her back, even though they had been divorced for years - even though Jim had been called to the house on numerous occasions to chase the drunk deadbeat off of the property, prevent him from stealing lawn mowers, power tools or the family car. If he was alive, he could charm Joyce. No. Jim would not pursue Joyce romantically for the same reasons he wouldn't have another child with Diane. The potential for heartbreak, the odds of pain were too great.

Besides, Chrissy Carpenter was a redhead now, and he really wanted to explore that. He tried to do so, one night a few months after he moved back to Hawkins. The two of them agreed to meet at a tavern - he showed up early and her figure was a blur by the time she arrived. He made a complete ass of himself, slurring and mumbling his sorrows into a tumbler of whisky. It seemed that he only closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again and seeing a very concerned looking Joyce Byers. He wondered for a moment if he had always been on the date with Joyce, that he had just dreamed up Chrissy. Anyway, the tiny woman somehow managed to get him into her car and drive him home. He vaguely remembered crying and

saying that he loved her, but when she saw him two days later, she never let on. It was just another thing they both silently agreed to never speak of again. Time marched on, and his bedpost racked up enough notches to render the metaphorical piece of furniture structurally unsound.

He kept an eye on Jonathan whenever he could. The boy, the other thing they did not talk about, was growing up angry and isolated. Jim never once saw the boy attend any of the keggers he regularly busted, and that was concerning. Nearly every teen in Hawkins ended up puking out Schnapps in a field or in the Harringtons' pool at some point. Not that he cared if Lonnie's kid had no friends, that was absurd. Why would that be something he thought about? Apparently he was artistic and rarely seen in public without his grandfather's old Pentax. The secret part of Jim that certainly did care quite a bit felt that the boy's namesake would be busting with pride if he were still alive.

And then things became complicated. The younger boy went missing, and Joyce showed up in Jim's office, demanding that he help her find him. It was like a film noir in full technicolor, only the dame was a frazzled single mother with a bad haircut, and not a smoky-eyed and sultry. Jim wasn't exactly Humphrey Bogart either. His alcoholism wasn't martinis-and-gauloises glamorous, and his gut was becoming substantial. So maybe less film noir and more just really fucking sad.

If anything, the incident allowed him to interact with Jonathan. They had been used to seeing each other from afar. Again, Jonathan's lone wolf ways meant that the boy more or less stayed in his own lane and out of the way of the Hawkins police. With Jim working so closely with Joyce to find Will, he found himself in a position to offer gestures that were downright fatherly. He clapped the boy on the shoulder and reassured him of his mother's fortitude, something Jim had never, ever lost faith in even if he doubted everything else about her character. He even tried a manly punch to the shoulder, though he regretted it, given Jonathan's slight frame. It was strange, how natural and yet utterly wrong-footed their interactions felt. Much like how Jim had interacted with his own father.

Long story short, he and Joyce crawled through hell and saved the boy. Those unwelcome feelings, the heat of realization that scorched

over him when he understood that he was not as opposed to a reprisal of their romance as previously believed, he wanted to write it off as Survival Horniness. She shared the exact same harrowing experience as he had, donned the same claustrophobic suit as he had, stepped through the same twisted version of Hawkins as he had. It was like Vietnam - except he had never wanted to fuck the stuffing out of his fellow soldiers after all was said and done.

But still, the age old hurt remained. She had left him. Deserted him after promising to start a life with him after high school. Who cared if that boy was his? Even if he was, Jim had never been privy to the information. Joyce had never deemed him worthy. Anyway, given his new responsibilities with the Department of Energy, romantic entanglements would not exactly be the best of ideas.

Jim's new boss hated him. That was fine, he hated that tiny bag of neuroses, Dr. Owens, too. He had made a deal with a high ranking pack of satans, and god-knew-why he did that thing. Certainly not because of Joyce Byers' sad brown eyes, not-at-fucking-all. But yes, it was because of her. And a little bit of him. It was nice, feeling like he could save a child and spare a parent the absolute, never-ending pang of despair that came with a dead kid.

Anyway, it was done and they owned him. Mostly late night patrol bullshit and redirecting reports and turning the other cheek as he did so. And constantly searching for the girl. Forever searching for the girl. They didn't know about the Eggos and Leftovers Hidey Hole, though. Actually, it was a lot more clerical work than one would expect from a shady "The Government Owns You" type of deal. So much paperwork. The paperwork was probably an extension of Dr. Owens' hatred.

"Oh, hello James," Dr. Owens greeted one evening, running a hand through his curly brown hair. "Thank you so much for coming here so late in the evening. I hate to think that I was keeping you from something, given that it took you an hour and a half to get here."

"I'm sorry about that, sir. There was a three car pileup outside of town today. People are stupid on the holidays, and maybe you remember that my day job is Chief of Police, not your personal secretary," Jim replied with a sneer. The lab was cold, unlike the fire

in Joyce Byers' backyard, where he had been enjoying New Years' Eve drinks. He had gone pale when Will had walked into the backyard and informed him of the call. It was not outside of the realm of possibility that the Department knew Joyce's number, but it had felt a bit like someone was walking over his grave when he realized that they knew exactly where he had been that evening.

"Funny. I heard you were off-duty tonight." The small man handed Jim a medium sized cardboard box filled with manila envelopes and yellowing papers.

"What is this?" Jim asked, not immediately accepting the offering.

"Just a little extension of the cleanup. We don't really need these files anymore. Destroy them please."

"Couldn't you have-"

"We really can't bother. But you can." Dr. Owens was sneering, and Jim had no idea why. He held out his arms to take the box, and the doctor attempted to hand it over before letting it fall out of his arms and onto the floor.

"Well, shit. Sorry. Gotta go James."

Jim repressed the 100,000,000th urge to strangle the man and waited for him to leave the office before he bent low to pick up the files that had tipped out of the box. His blood froze in his veins when he happened upon a small pile of photographs. A few of the ones he flipped over revealed a girl who looked very much like a young Joyce - thin, bruised, unconscious and hooked up to machines. Others were of a basement room, maybe an old classroom, littered with evidence of someone living shabbily within its walls. Jim, knowing that his orders were to destroy and not snoop, investigated the contents of the envelopes further.

**Niall Hansard**

**Louisa Hansard**

**Joyce Fairley**

## **Jonathan Byers**

All these names, intrinsically tied to the organization that had been responsible for Will's disappearance. Jim felt sick when he finished Joyce's file. These had been given to him to pore over. To hurt. To feel like an utter fucking moron. He and Joyce both had secrets, it seemed.



## 13. Chapter 13

Here we are folks. The end of the road. Massive thanks to all of you who have read, kudos, commented or talked me through writing this beastie of a fic.

You can find me on tumblr [StarMaamMke](#) or my sideblog which is dedicated to reblogging and posting Stranger Things fanfiction [StrangerThingsFics](#) . It is a cross ship blog, so if you want your work to be featured there, just drop me a line. I do a bit of tag surfing from time to time as well.

Thank you again!

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Joyce had just wanted a few hours to herself. She had finally mustered the courage to take Karen Wheeler up on her offer to watch the boys for a few hours so she could have a little bit of fun. Jonathan had insisted that he was old enough to watch Will, but Joyce did not think a 12 year-old made a proper babysitter, no matter how grown up said 12 year-old behaved. Besides, Karen had a daughter who was Jonathan's age, and Joyce felt that maybe the two of them could be friends. Jonathan so badly needed friends.

It was only going to be a few drinks. Lonnie had been up to his usual tricks that week, showing up in the middle of the night to beg to be let back into Joyce's life, screaming and throwing whatever he could get his hands on when she told him 'no thanks'. This time, it had been Will who had called the police while the two of them were screaming their throats raw at each other.

Of all the people to answer that call, of all the officers that would have most certainly been available to come to her aid, (because what else were they doing in Hawkins, really?) it was Jim Hopper who pounded on the door.

"Who the hell is it?" Lonnie roared.

Will emerged from the hallway and ran for the front door. "I called the cops," he announced meekly.

Joyce grabbed Lonnie by the collar when she saw that he was going to lunge at Will to prevent the boy from answering the door. Lonnie reeled around and shoved Joyce, and the edge of the coffee table connected with the back of her knees to send her sprawling backwards just as Jim Hopper was let inside of the house.

Joyce barely managed to get to her feet before Jim was slamming Lonnie against a wall, face first, and twisting the smaller man's arms behind his back so he could be cuffed. She noticed a bloom of red trickle down from Lonnie's nostrils. Broken nose again. She hoped his new teenage girlfriend liked the De Niro in Raging Bull look.

Jim did not speak to her until after Lonnie was loaded into the back of the squad car. "Are you hurt?" he asked, looking down at her with a furrowed brow.

Joyce shook her head. "You didn't have to be so rough with him, Hop. This isn't high school."

Jim scowled at her and took a step back. "I was called over here on police business, not to settle old scores. I witnessed a scene of domestic abuse, and I responded in kind, unless you wanted me to let him knock your block off again?" His tone was icy and one 'ma'am' away from totally formal.

"He pushed me, he didn't hit me. I don't think he meant..." Joyce stopped herself. Her old habit of defending Lonnie was coming out again, and she was supposed to be done with that. They were divorced, and she hated his guts. Maybe it was because of the person making the accusations. She looked at Jim and all she saw was ignored phone calls and envelopes marked 'Return to Sender.' She had reached out to him in her time of need and he just...

"Are you pressing charges?" Jim demanded in an impatient tone.

Joyce remembered that Lonnie had been a breath away from assaulting her seven year old. "Yep."

So Lonnie was booked and cooling his heels in jail again. Joyce managed to get a restraining order this time around. Surprisingly, Jim had been helpful in getting her to obtain one. Surprising because

Joyce was certain the man despised her. Granted, he thought that she had abandoned him for Lonnie, but still. They were different people. Joyce had emerged from that church basement a different person. They had lived lifetimes on their own paths since prom - but Joyce supposed that she would not be a pleasant person to be around if her child died, so she chalked up most of Jim's resentment to the fact that he was dealing with grief in his own way.

So that had been the week Joyce had been having when she walked into the Crystal Tavern. She had put on makeup and one of her nicer dresses, even though she had no delusions of going home with anyone. She just wanted to look nice, drink in peace, and not think about the mountain of responsibilities pressing down and crushing her.

It was a Friday, so it didn't have quite the weekend crowd, but it wasn't entirely empty either. Joyce started to take a seat at a secluded little table in the corner, but someone at the edge of the bar made her pause. It was Jim, and he was practically slumped over in his seat. His date, a petite redhead, looked utterly miserable - she kept looking around the room with wide eyes, as if a rescuer would appear to save her from the mistake of agreeing to a date with a recently divorced man. Joyce sighed, as she observed the living consequence of drinking to forget, and decided to intervene.

"Oh hey, Joyce!" the woman greeted with overdone enthusiasm as Joyce approached. She realized that the petite redhead was Chrissy Carpenter. Jim had been feeling nostalgic, apparently.

"No one will fault you for going home, Chrissy," Joyce remarked.

"I kind of drove him."

"I'll take it from here."

"Oh thank God!"

Chrissy practically fled from the bar. Joyce poked Jim's shoulder when she realized he was snoring. "Hop, come on."

The large man jerked awake and regarded Joyce with bleary eyes.

"Chrissy? You're late."

"Chrissy just left, Hop. You blew it with her. It's Joyce."

Somehow, Joyce managed to drag Jim to her car. Once she had them both buckled in, she sighed and looked over him. He was whimpering in his seat, eyes half-closed. So this was the mighty Jim Hopper, basketball star and big city cop. This was what the sky looked like when it fell on the naturally blessed. Joyce found her silver lining in the fact that her whole life had been a study in disappointment, otherwise she might be incoherent and ready to vomit in an ex's car too.

"Ever'thing is a mess, Joyce," he muttered, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his flannel.

"I'm so sorry about that, Hop. How about we get you home?"

Jim nodded and heaved a shuddering sigh. "Y'know how to get..." he trailed off as his eyes closed and his head lolled to one side.

"I know it well," Joyce murmured as she set off for Carl Hopper's old getaway trailer by the lake. A gentle rain had begun to fall, which made Joyce a little tired and melancholy as she drove through the dark. "You took me here after prom, remember?" she inquired, not really expecting an answer. Jim was snoring softly.

The trailer looked a bit more shabby than Joyce had remembered. There were beer cans lining the railing of the patio, standing at attention like Schlitz soldiers. The patio looked like it needed to be sanded and stained, a task Joyce would offer to do, if only she and Jim were on actual speaking terms. Maybe she would find a way to drop off one of Grandpa Jonathan's old DIY manuals on his doorstep.

"Your dad would be pissed if he saw the way you were treating his second home, Hop," Joyce scolded as she dragged Jim through the front door. She grunted as she hefted him onto his battered old couch. He muttered incoherently and snored in response. Joyce sighed sadly, pulled the flannel blanket from the back of the couch, and shook it out, cringing as a little cloud of dust emerged from the material. It smelled of cigarette smoke and musty books, like the rest

of the trailer.

Joyce slumped onto the floor next to the couch and covered her face with her hands. It would be Jim Hopper that completely ruined her one and only night out. She swatted at his hand as it moved to stroke the top of her head. "No, thank you!" she scolded in the same tone she used when Jonathan or Will did something she disapproved of.

"I love you, Joyce," he murmured sleepily.

The words jolted through her like electricity. It was a lie, of course, it had to be. It was drunk talk, and more to the point, it was too late. She hated him in that moment. Hated him for taking her by the hand and dragging her back to that other time, where words like that actually meant something. The intensity of her hatred brought her to her feet and propelled her towards the kitchen in search of the strong drink her well-meaning rescue had denied her.

"That's funny, Hop. You've barely spoken a word to me since you moved back here." Joyce wrinkled her nose as she inspected the water spots on the tumbler she took out of an overhead cabinet. She shrugged and filled it with amber liquid. "I thought your parents left you a bunch of money. Why are you drinking Kessler?" She took a dainty sip and walked back into the living room, where she took a seat on an orange corduroy armchair. Her fingers played at a worn spot in the material as she eyed up her slumbering companion. He was getting a little heavy around the middle, which was puzzling considering Joyce had not seen any food in his refrigerator, save for a jar of pickles.

Jim opened his eyes, blinked twice, and frowned at Joyce. "What are you doing here?" he slurred.

"Give me a cigarette and go back to sleep."

Jim's hand fumbled into the pocket of his jeans until he pulled out a slightly crushed pack of Marlboro Reds. He held out the pack towards her and she moved to take it. Jim's other hand closed around her wrist. "Please don't leave me," he whimpered.

Joyce gave an inward scream and used her other hand to extricate

herself from his grasp, gently prying his thick, strong fingers from her wrist. "I will stay with you long enough to make sure you aren't going to need your stomach pumped," she promised in a lover-like tone. He smiled and turned onto his back.

Joyce groaned. "No, no, Hop." She stood and went on a search for a large bowl or bucket. Her heart rate sped up to a fever pitch when she found an empty ice-cream bucket. Wells Blue Bunny. She did not allow that particular brand in the house because of the memories it dredged up. She plucked the bucket from the cabinet with a violently trembling hand and walked over to the couch. She set it down and gave herself a few moments to breathe, to mentally will her heart to stop rising into her throat. It would not do, having him choke to death on his own vomit just because of silly hysterics.

After a few moments, Joyce found herself somewhat stable. "Remember when I told you what I used to have to do for my mom when she was on one of her benders?" she asked with a nervous laugh. Jim was sleeping again and did not answer. Joyce bit her lip as she surveyed his hulking form. If she could do this as a small child for her mother, she could do this as an adult. The weight ratios probably weren't that different when all was said and done. She knelt and whispered, "I'm going to turn you over onto your stomach. Can you help me out a little?" He grunted and thankfully cooperated. Joyce was glad that at least one thing about the evening was turning out alright.

Joyce was back in the armchair, nursing the cheap whiskey and taking tiny drags from Jim's cigarette. Reds were for people with death wishes, she thought. She looked over just as he was raising his head and opening his eyes. "How're you?" he mumbled before closing his eyes.

Exhausted over the events of the evening and overwhelmed with past memories, Joyce was just plain ready to vent. She threw all thoughts of safety and secrecy to the wind and got up to refresh her drink before settling down again to properly answer his question. "I know this sounds rich, considering you've just gone through losing a kid and getting a divorce, but to answer your question: not great." He mumbled some sort of response that she did not understand. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you, actually."

Mimi's antique cuckoo clock began to play a tinkling tune accompanied by a gong signifying that it was 11 o'clock. Joyce took a long drag as she contemplated what she was about to do. She had made promises. Promises that bought her the roof over her head and paid off medical bills. She looked around, as if expecting to see one of those men in suits skulking around corners. She wondered if what had happened to her was even a priority to 'those people'. It didn't matter. Jim was opening the floodgates, and Joyce needed to say the words aloud. He wouldn't remember it anyway.

So Joyce told him. It came out in a stream of babble with breaks to sip and smoke. Joyce never could keep a steady pace when explaining herself. Surprisingly, her voice did not break or quaver when she talked about the basement. She recited the details as though she had been practicing her entire life.

"That fight we had at Benny's...I lied to you. Jonathan is yours." A thick lump, heavy as lead, formed in her throat at the confession. "I think Lonnie knew too. I mean, he didn't really question it. Word got out that I was back in town, pregnant and abandoned. Most people assumed it was him because Niall said so." Joyce chuckled and ground the spent cigarette into a nearby ashtray. She lit another. She wouldn't buy Jim another pack; this was the price he was going to pay for ruining her evening.

"It's so funny. I was shunned after I got back, could barely step foot into the grocery store without getting dirty looks - but Lonnie comes back, after everyone assumes he was the one who knocked me up and kicked me to the curb, and the entire town pats him on the back for doing the right goddamn thing. What a fucking hero he was, cashing in on your 'Get Out of Nam Free' baby. That's all he saw when he got back. Told me I would be saving his life..." Joyce trailed off as the tears began to fall. Her pulse was racing again. "He said, 'let's make a go of it, babe. I'll do good by you and the kid, just don't let them send me out there'. So we got married." Jim began to stir, but did not wake. "He didn't keep his end of the bargain, in case you were wondering. He ran off again and again and still got a chorus of 'atta boys' when he came back, but I was always Teen Pregnancy Joyce with the dope fiend mom." Joyce frowned and raised a chiding finger, waving it in the air as she scolded no one in particular. "Don't let

your daughters stare directly into her eyes, sluttiness is contagious." She laughed at her last statement - laughed long and hard until she began to sob.

"Don't cry, Petal." The endearment stopped Joyce's tears and wracking sobs in their tracks.

"Don't you ever call me that again!" Joyce stood up, walked over to the couch and kicked it as hard as she could. Hot, sharp pain lanced up her toes and leg, and she quickly sat to attend to injury. She hoped she hadn't fractured her foot. That was the last thing she needed. It didn't seem to be broken, but it was going to be sore. Joyce hobbled to the bathroom and found a few aspirin. She brought it back to the living room and downed it with whiskey.

"I know you went to visit him in Indianapolis. I went when I could, and at least he could see his grandson, even though I'm sure the fact that I had a baby at 17 hurried him to his grave. He tried so hard to raise me to be different from her..."

"She's dead, by the way. There wasn't a burial, and I never saw her again after Absalom. They sent me a letter along with the deed to the house. Sometimes I wonder if asking for the house in that deal made them kill her. Like a Monkey's Paw kind of thing. Sometimes I wonder if she's dead at all, and then I remember that I don't care. No one in town cared or asked where she was, so I didn't tell them. The only person who was ever a real mother to me was yours. I think she always knew the truth. She was never awful to me like the others - your dad never looked at me the same way after I got back, but your mother was always so good to me. Not a single one of us deserved her." Joyce wiped her face with her sleeve. "Benny was good to me too. He proposed, you know. He was never in love with me, but he wanted someone to 'do right by.' I didn't have the heart to say 'yes' and have you hate him."

The clock struck midnight. Joyce was drunk and maudlin, and it was time to go. "I feel so stupid for telling you this. Stupid and afraid. I could get driven off the road by a shadow agency, but at least I got it off my chest." She stood and gave him one more long look. "You should have read the letters, though. I tried to tell you as best as I could."



Joyce's fears turned out to be needless. Jim never mentioned that night again, and she was fairly certain if he tried to recall it, everything would go hazy around the time Joyce showed up at the Crystal Tavern to take him home. They coexisted peacefully in Hawkins, even exchanged kind words when he ended up in her checkout lane. Anyone who did not know them would never have been able to tell that they had once been the best of friends or romantically involved by the way they interacted.

The years passed, and Will's disappearance thrust her into his path once again. Once the details of the people involved with said disappearance came to light, the wheels in Joyce's head began to turn. Joyce still had journals that had once belonged to her mother, and she poured over them once in a great while, when the need to understand what had happened became too great. The journals were littered drawings, a mixture of crude and sophisticated, all portraying the same dark creature with claw-like hands and what appeared to be an exotic flower for a head. The same creature that emerged from her living room wall the night she successfully communicated with Will through the lights.

Then there were the people in the dark suits and that name she had heard before in passing. Brenner. She looked at his grinning, golden face and wondered if he had once gone by a different name, a name that came up in the journals. Matthew. When she told Martin Brenner that she knew who he was, she was implying that her knowledge went beyond clippings in a newspaper and second hand accounts from Terry Ives' skeptical sister.

Shortly after Will was returned to her, the nightmares started. In them, she was always sitting in her living room, staring at the alphabet wall. The lights would flicker and dance around her and the air would turn frigid. Sometimes it was her mother in the wall, sometimes it was her grandfather. It depended on which song was playing down the hallway from Jonathan's record player. If it was Anna Marly, it was Grandpa Jonathan. If it was Tennessee Ernie Ford, it was her mother. The lights would tell her to run, or call her Petal, or they would spell out gibberish until Joyce was screaming at them for clarity. They always exploded in the end, sending colored shards to scrape against her face and get stuck in her hair. She always woke

in a tangle of sheets, sweat clinging to her even as the faulty heater failed to warm her little home against the bitter winter cold. Sometimes she swore she could feel a ghost of a sting across her face from where the lights exploded.

Joyce woke from that dream with a piercing scream early New Year's morning. Someone was pounding on her front door, which was not part of the dream. She gave herself a moment to find composure and finished the tepid glass of water on her nightstand. She then threw on a robe and announced that she was on her way. She wondered if it was Jim. He had been over earlier that evening, having drinks and enjoying her company. She had been gaining the courage to invite him to stay when he got the call. He stayed for a while after the phone call, but his mood had gone from light and cheerful to dark and brooding.

"Is it police business? Shouldn't you go?" Joyce inquired when she finished handing out hats and noisemakers to the kids inside the house. She sat next to him by the fire pit, where he was staring blankly.

"Give me a moment. What time is it?"

"11:59."

Joyce felt Jim's hand cup her cheek, turning her face towards his. His mouth brushed against hers briefly and sweetly before he stood and left her alone. Joyce's cheeks burned, and she was too stunned to stop him from leaving. She walked through the rest of the party in a haze, and was grateful that the kids had other places to be that evening, so she could be left alone with her thoughts.

Joyce answered the door. It was Jim after all. He looked pale and stricken, and his eyes were shining oddly, as though he had been crying. Joyce suddenly felt very afraid. "Is Will okay? Did something happen at the Wheelers?"

Jim shook his head. "No. I mean, I don't know. I'm sure he's fine."

"Then why-" He cut her off with a hug, tight and fierce. Joyce's arms dangled uselessly at her side for a moment before she raised them to

return the embrace. "Jim?"

"I'm sorry."

**The End**